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With the Gilt Off

With the Gilt Off

By

A. St. John Adcock

G. P. Putnam's Sons
New York & London
The Knickerbocker Press
1923

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OCT 16 1923

To

COULSON KERNAHAN

(who may recognise in the shorter of these stories revised versions of five of my "East End Idylls," which, published under his auspices, brought me nothing so good as a friendship that I count among the best of my possessions)

with fraternal regards

from

THE AUTHOR.

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WITH THE GILT OFF

THE SOUL OF PENELOPE SANDERS

It had been raining hard nearly all day; it was raining still. Torrents of dirty water ran and gurgled along the gutters; the lamp-lights were hazily reflected in streaming pavements; here and there glimmered a shallow puddle that was pitted incessantly by the slanting rain; and the roadways lay deep in liquid mud that spurted from passing hoofs and spun in circling mists about the following wheels.

Lights glowing in the windows of the rows of plain houses had a cheery, comfortable look, which lent a keener edge of desolation and wet discomfort to the streets. Few people were abroad, and they, for the most part, flitted by in haste under dripping umbrellas; here and there little groups of disconsolate outcasts huddled together, damp and shivering, in doorways or under shadowy arches.

One outcast there was who loitered indifferently through the rain, bedraggled and wretched. Once or twice she turned aside for shelter, but each time,

growing impatient with the persistent downpour, she re-emerged into it, and moved on again.

Presently, she went by the open door-way of a stunted, zinc mission hall, and caught a sidelong glimpse of the dry, bright interior and rows of attentive listeners. A warm air from within breathed upon her face as she crossed the line of light that lay athwart the pavement. She passed, but the misery of the night seemed instantly intensified; the temptation of the light and warmth overmastering her, she wavered and went back, and lurked unnoticed in the arid little vestibule.

The grateful warmth penetrated to her blood, as she stood there, till her numbed limbs were tingling with it; then, by degrees, she began involuntarily to become aware of the discourse of the preacher within.

He was a simple man, apparently, and uneducated, but spoke as if he were terribly in earnest; and, from falling on her ears in a spate of meaningless sound, his words took to themselves a meaning she was at no loss to understand. From being foolish and strange, what he said became extraordinarily familiar to her and momentous; it was as if a finer sense she had lost long since had been unexpectedly restored to her.

While she listened, old memories that had been buried in her heart these many years, and forgotten, rose ghost-like from their grave, and touched her with feelings of wistfulness and regret. They were sad and sacred remembrances born of the reminiscent crying of the preacher and the melancholy beating of the rain without—they were thoughts of the old home in the quiet inland village, the lamp-lit parlour, cosy on such wild nights as this, and the kindly household faces—thoughts of innocent dreams that were hers when she was a girl, of her first love, her young ideals, and all the white sweetness of the life that was hers and that she had sullied now so irrevocably.

The preacher was passionately in earnest and had a firm faith in the Devil. He allured and menaced his hearers with the joys of Heaven in one hand and the torments of Hell in the other; but it was exactly what she had been used to in the far-off days that were vanished, and therefore it exercised the mightier influence on her now. His warnings and promises carried with them all the weight of her own early beliefs; his voice was like a remembered voice from the past reiterating, "Depart, ye cursed, into everlasting fire!" and like a voice from the past came also the Diviner

pronouncement, "Neither do I condemn thee; go, and sin no more!"

The harmonium was droning, the congregation had risen and were singing a last hymn, and she delayed no longer; she shrank shamefacedly from being detected there.

Hurrying along again through the stinging rain, weary and hungry, she was sustained by a new and high resolve that was gathering shape and strength in her brain. Hitherto she had been desperately careless of all but her immediate needs, but now, this night, with those dead voices of yesterday in her ears, those dead hands of the past beckoning and leading her, she realised, as she had never realised before, the degradation and vileness of the life she was living. Yet how was she to escape from it? "Go, and sin no more!" But now, fallen to what she was, how was it possible for her to live and not sin? At this moment she was troubled with remorse, and repentant, and repentance was said to mean pardon; but she could not trust herself, and to-morrow would call upon her very definitely to choose between sin and starvation. If she could die to-night, her heart cleansed by the purifying fires of her penitence, all her past forgiven, and she thus made spotless— It was her only hope,

her one way of escape; and the thought and the hope grew and brightened until they dazzled even while they inspired her.

She sped onward in a tearful, exultant frenzy; she was carried away by the unwonted fervour that had so strangely taken hold upon her. Within the darkness of her own mind, she saw a certain narrow street already, with a dusky, oily flash of the river at the end of it.

But when that goal of her journey was yet half a mile distant, in passing under the gloom of a wide railway-arch, she stumbled over a body that lay stretched on the stones, and almost fell. The whimpering groan of a man in pain arrested her, and she stopped and stooped to him.

"Hurt you?" she enquired, not unkindly. "Sorry. I couldn't see yer here in the dark."

The man raised himself on his elbow and turned a gaunt emaciated face up to her. Its ghastly whiteness caught the shine of the lamp at the end of the arch, and a swift, puzzled expression swept over it—an expression that simultaneously agitated her own features.

"What!" she gasped. "It isn't—is it Tom Hamlin?"

"My God!" he ejaculated, his peaked face

smitten with apprehension. "It's never you, Pen!"

She stood a minute gazing down at him, speechless. Those gentle memories that had come to her in the vestibule of the mission hall took another light and other shadows from the presence of this man. He sank back, and lay watching her uneasily, labouring for breath, and shaken with fits of coughing.

"You're ill," she said abruptly.

"Bronchitis," he answered drearily. "I'm about done up."

"You ought to be in a hospital."

"I know. I thought I could pull through, but I collapsed all of a sudden just now."

"You ought not to be lyin' here."

"Got nowhere to go. Had no work for weeks, an' nothin' to eat since this mornin'." He was interrupted by a paroxysm of coughing. "I'm done. See what I've come to, Pen. You couldn't wish me any worse—a beggar, and dyin' in the street."

"I can't help you," she was beginning.

"I don't expect it—no right to," he struck in. "Never thought I'd see you any more. *I've* brought you to this. I thought when I saw you you'd be hating me and kick up a row."

"I don't hate you," she responded dully. "Not now. What's the good?"

"You were always better to me than I deserved."

"We were both fools, and it's too late to grouse about it."

So they crouched there, for a few minutes, outcasts of the world, and finding a dim comfort in each other's companionship.

"Ah, Pen, I've been worse than a fool!" he sighed. "I've often thought of old times—of you down yonder in the old home—and wondered what had happened to you. I was a brute to serve you as I did. It was me brought you to this. I never meant to. I meant to have kept my promise, and I let you down——"

"Never mind. What's the use o' talking of that now?"

"I left you to face the trouble alone, poor old girl!"

"Oh, well, and I ran away from it," she laughed bitterly. "I came to London, thinkin' I might run against you here. . . . And I have, at last!"

"When I remember——"

"No good rememberin'. Cut it out!"

She was a little surprised that she felt no particular resentment against him; he had wronged

her—but it all happened so long ago, and so much had happened since, that she could recall it almost without emotion, certainly without any acute sensibility of the injury he had done her. The wrath she had once cherished against him had burnt itself out, and she felt neither the power nor the will to rekindle it. So far as she was concerned, it was all over, and could never be altered. She melted to a vague pity for him and for herself; life had been cruel to them both; and she was drawn to him even with a subtle tenderness, for he had come to her, lonely, from her past, and the sanctities of that past were about him as well as its sins.

The intermittent coughing that racked and tore him was terrible to hear; it sent a chill through her, cold as she was.

"You mustn't stop here, anyhow," she said.

"What's the use of talkin'? Got nowhere to go, I'm starvin', and I can die as well here as anywhere. I'm too far gone to move," he whined. "I'm starvin', I tell you. I'd sell my soul, if I've got one, for a drink and a mouthful of grub."

"Perhaps I can sell mine for it," she returned, with a laugh; then, with sudden determination, "I'll get you something. You wait here till I come back."

He did not attempt to stay her. He closed his eyes and lay inert and wheezing painfully. One or two people went by and thought him drunk and asleep. How long she was gone he did not know, for he took no count of time; but by and by he was roused by her voice calling him. He had forgotten her, and for the moment fancied he was in the throes of some delirious dream, but as he gazed it came back on him that this was she in reality.

"Come on, Tom," she called, shaking him encouragingly. "Here, take a nip o' this."

He sat up, and she held a small bottle to his lips and the fierce bite of the brandy stirred him from his lethargy.

"I've picked up enough for a feed, an' brought a taxi for you." He had not seen it till now, standing by the kerb under the arch, and the driver eyeing him impassively from his seat. "Come on, old boy, you can come to my place with me," she urged him, with a flippant bitterness. "You did for me in this world long ago, an' now you've done for me in the next, so we may as well make the most o' what's left. Come on."

She helped him to his feet, and he staggered toward the glare of the taxi, broken, ague-smitten, helpless, and clinging to her for support.

THE SEAT OF REPENTANCE

"SAM," said Mrs. Webling, over Saturday night's supper, "you know that new man you an' your chaps at the Works have been guying all the week?"

Mr. Webling nodded with his mouth full.

A steady, decent man, but no paragon, he had spent the evening at his Working Man's Club quenching his thirst for knowledge and other stimulants, and had just come home hungry.

"Well, I wonder you had the heart to do it—I really do!" Mrs. Webling continued reproachfully. "He *is* a good feller."

"Who said he wasn't?"

"You don't treat him as if he was."

"He's all right. Who's done him any harm?"

"Why you, an' the rest of you at the Works, accordin' to what you bin tellin' me every night this week," she protested indignantly. "An' you the foreman, too! Wonder you encourage such goings on. It's shameful, I call it."

"Here, steady on! What's the matter? Little bit o' larkin' don't do nobody no harm now an' agen." Mr. Webling's plump figure began to quiver with reminiscent chucklings. "You should ha' heard Wat Simkins this arternoon. Lord— I larfed fit to bust! Couldn't help it. Wat, he gits behind this new cove, Joe Williams, an' he says— says he——"

But Mr. Webling had to stop; he could not finish for laughing.

"I don't want to hear what he said," cried Mrs. Webling, with warmth. "It's nothin' to larf at."

"You never heard him. You don't know what he said."

"No, nor don't want to. Pity you can't find somethin' better to do with your time, all of you, than larf an' make silly jokes over a poor man's misfortune. Cruel and cowardly, I call it, to torment a man an' sneer at him, like you an' them other grinnin' jackanapes at the Works has bin doin' all the week wi' this poor feller!"

"Here! Gently does it, missis—gently!" Mr. Webling interrupted, his ruddy face rounding in surprise. "What's all the excitement? What are you upsettin' yerself about? Why, you've larfed more than we every night when I told you."

"More shame for me, if I did. I don't know nothin' about him 'cept what you told me, else I wouldn't. If I'd known all about him, same as you do——"

"What d'yer mean? What do I know about him?"

"You knew about his wife?"

"Never knew he'd got one. He never said a word to me about her, nor I don't believe to anybody else. What about her?"

"You know he only moved into these parts a week or so ago, when he got the job under you at Piper's Works?"

Mr. Webling nodded again.

"You knew he'd bin out o' work a long while afore he come here, an' was pinched with havin' a rough time of it?"

"That's nothin', old gel. We're all 'ard up at times, ain't we? He ain't so bloomin' thin-skinned——"

"But you ain't all got wives that's crippled for life an' laid up invalids, an' you doin' yer own housework an' tellin' her lies to keep her cheerful, an' never lettin' her know that a pack o' rough brutes at the Works is jeerin' an' larfin' at yer, an' all becos——"

She had to stop; but it was not for laughing.

Mr. Webling coughed uneasily, and grew impatient of waiting for her to go on.

"I never knew his wife was a invaleed, an' all that," he said apologetically. "Who's bin tellin' you, missis?"

"Why, when I was out shoppin' to-day," she resumed, touching her eyes with her apron, and quieting down, "I dropped in to have a cup of tea with Annie Robins, an' she said she'd got some new lodgers, an' they was the Williamses—Joe Williams an' his wife."

"Livin' there, is he? They've got his address at the Works, but I didn't know it was there."

"Yes. Well, an' I started to tell her—laughin' like—how you and your chaps had bin makin' your jokes at him all the week, an' she didn't larf a bit—she got quite upset, an' when she told me what sort o' folk they was I felt downright ashamed."

"How d'yer mean? Whaffor?"

"Why, they've been shockin' poor an' had a lot o' trouble. They bin married near six year; an' had two children, an' both of 'em died—poor things!"

Mr. Webling ate in silence; with a fleeting thought of his own two, now sound asleep in the next room.

"And a year or more ago, it seems, Mrs. Williams had a fall an' injured her spine—an' there she is, a cripple, an' never won't be any better, an' the way that man—that Joe Williams looks after her, an' goes without things, an' won't let her know, an' makes believe he's always happy an' comfortable as can be so's she shan't be worried—well, there, when Annie Robins told me it fair made me cry."

She was a homely, kindly, sympathetic body, and could hardly help crying again to think of it.

"Why didn't he tell me, then?" growled Mr. Webling.

"Becos he's not the kind of man to make a fuss over what he has to put up with," she retorted sharply; then continued, "We went upstairs to see her. Annie carried tea up for all of us; she says she takes her tea up an' has it with her becos Mrs. Williams is so lonely. He does all the work in their two rooms—Joe Williams does. He's up before five every mornin', gets the place tidy, makes breakfast for both of 'em, and is on at the Works by six. Then he slips round home in the dinner hour, an' does the cookin' for both of 'em; an' he spends his Sundays and his even's chattin' an' readin' to her. O' course Annie Robins is in an' out keepin' an eye on her while he's away—

she's a real good sort, Annie—but he does everything for her; waits on her hand an' foot. He's a man, is Joe Williams, an' no mistake."

Mr. Webling remained mute, a sense of his heartless brutality growing upon him while he listened.

"She was all by herself when we went up," Mrs. Webling proceeded. "He was out—Joe Williams was—gone to do the shoppin'. She was very nice-lookin', but such a thin, white little creetur, Sam, it fair made my heart ache to see her. An', when she knew who I was, she got talkin' about you. She said Joe—her husband—liked you, an' spoke so well of you an' all his mates, an' she was so glad becos, she said, his last foreman had bin a nasty wretch who made Joe miserable an' her too, becos she couldn't bear to see Joe bothered.

"She talked a lot about that, an' every time she praised you, Sam—me knowing how scandalous you an' the rest of 'em have bin servin' that poor feller all the week—I went that red and awkward I didn't know how to answer. O' course, he wouldn't tell her the truth—he knowed she'd fret if he did. Y'see she's so helpless—she can only sit up there in bed an' do bits o' sewin', and she ain't much of a hand at that. She said so herself,

an' told me of her own accord about them trowsis of his. *She* sewed that patch on, with her own poor hands, and says she, 'I'm afraid it looks very ugly, but it was the only bit o' cloth I'd got that nearly matched 'em, and to make it fit proper I had to sew it,' she says, 'with the stripes across instead of downwards, like they is on the trowsis, an' that makes it show up more, but I'm so glad,' she says, 'Joe tells me nobody seemed to notice it.' Nobody notice it, indeed!" she scoffed indignantly. "When you an' your precious men don't seem to have had nothing else to notice all the week!"

"Well, we was only joking," Mr. Webling pleaded feebly. "If we had had any idea——"

"Only jokin'!" echoed Mrs. Webling. "It was no joke to them poor things! so poor with her illness an' him bein' out o' work that he couldn't buy a new pair, an' she an invaleed, slavin' with her own poor fingers to make him look decent, an' you inhuman mob o' Cheshire cats grinnin' an' laughin' at it!"

"But look here, missis, how could we tell? We just thought it looked funny——"

"Funny! Oh, very funny! What that dyin' cripple woman had done with her own dear hands!" cried Mrs. Webling, savagely dabbing at her eyes

with her handkerchief. "Very funny, I must say, an' I wonder you can think it, Sam."

Mr. Webling sat smoking and brooding by the fire, and meekly permitted her to talk herself down without further interruption.

He brooded deeply, and sufficiently indicated the direction his reflections had taken by enquiring, at length, as they were making ready for bed.

"Where's them old trowsis of mine I used last autumn when I was gardenin'?"

"What do you want with them to-night?" Mrs. Webling demanded.

"Don't want 'em to-night," he replied diffidently. "It's a notion I had. There's a biggish patch in 'em, y'know—you did it so's I could use 'em knockin' about at home. Seems to me, like if I was to go in 'em on Monday mornin' it might make Joe Williams easy, like. Sort of show him we'd only bin larkin', cos we wore the same sort ourselves at times. We ain't no bloomin' toffs; he's just one of us, an'—well, you know how I mean."

He blundered to a stop; but Mrs. Webling understood, and softened toward him. She was proud that he could be magnanimous and own he was wrong, and go such lengths in order to make amends to a subordinate.

"It would stop the others larfin' at him, anyhow," Mr. Webling added. "If they larfed at him it would be like larfin' at me, an' I'd punch their blarsted heads for 'em!"

"Yes," Mrs. Webling agreed, "it would put a stop to it, and I dessay it would make Joe Williams feel better. Something orter be done, but don't you go punchin' no heads or doin' anything silly. No need for that."

She fully encouraged him in his scheme of atonement, and heartily approved of a development of it that occurred to him after tea on Sunday evening.

"I'll just step round to the 'Black Lion,'" he said. "Wat Simkins an' some o' the others out of our room generally drops in there for a final Sunday evenings. Sure to catch some of 'em. I'll give 'em a word about this, an' let 'em know there's to be no more of it. They won't want no more—they'll be as sorry as me when I tell 'em."

Wat Simkins and two other of them were in the "Black Lion," consorting with sociable strangers, but, by a little deft manœuvring, Mr. Webling separated them from that leaven, and, getting them apart, briefly and emphatically unbosomed himself.

They were average good-natured fellows, as he was, and his disclosures moved them to genuine remorse.

"Why couldn't he 'ave let us know?" Wat grumbled.

"That's what I say," returned Mr. Webling. "Still, you know now, an' you understand there's not to be no more of it."

"Course there won't be," they chorused resentfully. "You was as bad as we was, Sam. But there'd never have been none of it at all if he'd told us," Wat supplemented. "I've a good mind to tell him so."

"Don't you do nothing of the kind," Mr. Webling warned him. "Less said the better. All you got to do is to be friendly as if it was nothing and you'd forgotten it. So happens," he added, with unction, for he was pleased Joe Williams had said he liked him and felt that this atonement reflected special credit on himself, "I've got a old pair of bags at home with a big patch on 'em, as I uses for gardenin'. I shall wear 'em to-morrow, casual like, for a few days, as if I was used to it, that'll make him think less of it—he won't feel so lonely like, so conspicuous."

"That's a good notion," Wat remarked.

Mr. Webling was proud of it himself, but dissembled.

"That Joe Williams, he looks like he was a sensitive bloke, when you think of it, an' I reckon we must have give him a hell of a time, so it's up to us," said one of the others, "to see if we can't ——"

"We don't want no damn sloppy sentiment over it," Mr. Webling checked him. "All you got to do is to shut up an' be friendly. Let him see it's done with, that's enough."

"That's right, Sam. Make him feel he's as good as the best of us."

"You'll see Edwards, Wat," urged Mr. Webling, "and let him know about this?"

"I will; I'll see him on the way home to-night."

"That's all. What I say is, if there's any little friendly thing in a quiet way you can think of to make him feel all's well an' we're all pals together—why, do it."

With which farewell conjuration Mr. Webling left them.

Early in the morning he set out for the Works complacently satisfied with himself. He was conscious of the large patch behind him, and even though, for the time, his coat concealed it from the

public eye, the consciousness of it warmed him right through with a self-righteous glow.

He climbed the stairs of his own department in the rambling old cabinet-making factory; but the moment he was inside the door he was seized with a strange dizziness, and paused.

Joe Williams was at the far end of the room sorting some blocks of wood, but at the long bench stood the four other men, with their coats off and their backs to the door; and either through much dwelling on one consideration he had succumbed to an absurd illusion, or else——

Wat Simkins looked round, and with a furtive glance at Williams, to see that he was beyond hearing, stepped across to Mr. Webling to vindicate himself.

"You said do any little friendly thing we could think of, an' I couldn't think of nothing else," he whispered hoarsely. "I had an old pair at home an' thought two of us wouldn't matter—might be better than one—but, blimey! if these other three damn idiots ain't all——"

He broke off abruptly, and, as Joe Williams turned, he resumed his place at the bench.

Mr. Webling gazed confusedly along the four back views, and realised that his scheme of repen-

tance had been transformed into an unqualified outrage; the victim would naturally assume that it was a deliberate attempt to caricature a distressing feature of his wardrobe and cover him with more ridicule than ever.

From these gloomy reveries, Mr. Webling was roused by Joe Williams, a brawny, genial, fair-haired giant, who was by this close upon him, and wishing him a cheery good-morning.

"I've got the bulge of them this morning, Mr. Webling," he said, winking in an ecstasy of amusement. "They couldn't let that patch o' mine alone all last week, and here they all come with a big 'un on theirselves this morning to take a fresh rise out o' me, an' blow my buttons!" he fairly bubbled with laughter, "I've got a new pair!"

Mr. Webling looked down and saw that he had.

He stood thunderstruck, and Joe passed him.

It was impossible to explain the situation and justify himself without wallowing in that sentimentality of which all of them were ashamed to be suspected. Mr. Webling recognised this, yet, in the circumstances, felt a kind of shyness against taking off his coat.

Suddenly he began a frantic fumbling in his pockets.

"By George!" he exclaimed, with apparent anxiety, "I've come without it. Wat!" he said briskly, "if I'm wanted, say I'll be back in ten minutes—just goin' to run round home to—to get something I left behind!"

JENNY CHOOSES

Lavender Row, which is in Hackney, was accustomed to sensations, and would not have been happy without them. During comparatively recent years it has been intimately concerned in an elopement, a judicial separation, two accidental deaths, and a variety of police-court cases touching upon more or less serious assaults and drunken disorders. For it is a long, dingy street given over to a large and very miscellaneous tenantry of the poorer kind. But never had the Row been so stirred to its grim depths, so blown with notoriety and unhallowed excitement, as it was on the occasion of Alf Jarvis's sudden departure from it.

His departure was final, and the manner of it was violent and mysterious.

One night in autumn, a night of ghostly mists and no moon, Alf failed to come home. As he was not a man of regular habits this was nothing unusual. But in the morning his body was found lying on the mangy, green waste of London Fields

—dead, with a savage gash in the throat that, according to medical opinion, could not have been self-inflicted.

While he lived, nobody had been extravagantly fond of Alf, except perhaps his parents, and they were half afraid of him. A loafing, ill-conditioned ruffian, he had suffered imprisonment for one brutal outrage, and was strongly suspected of others that could not be brought home to him. Nevertheless, his death was commonly accepted in Lavender Row as a calamity; it was discussed as passionately as if he had been a real loss to the locality, and men and women reaped glory in a small way by retailing his sayings and doings and posing as his friends.

Those who could not, by any straining of presumption, lay claim to such distinction as this were glad to listen to those who could, though they listened with envy. For Alf's name loomed large in the newspapers; his portrait was there, too, with condensed biographies of him, unabridged reports of the crime, notes about his family, and as much other known detail, conjecture and anecdote as the papers invariably treasure up about celebrities of national importance.

One paper came out with portraits of his father

and mother and the house in which they occupied two rooms; another gave a ground plan of London Fields, with a cross on the spot where the body had been discovered. Others printed scrappy interviews with bosom friends of Alf's who had scarcely been on nodding terms with him while he was in the flesh, and men who could point to such published statements with the pride of authorship lived, temporarily, on dizzy pinnacles up which outsiders climbed to them deferentially to snatch a lesser, remoter importance from having enjoyed the privilege of paying for their liquid refreshments.

Day by day Lavender Row hummed with all the excitement of this. The police were at fault; they could find no clue to the murderer; and, throughout this thrilling period, of all who rose to local eminence by reason of their acquaintance with Alf, none rose higher than Jenny Cripps, nor took a subtler pride in the elevation, nor appealed thence more prevailingly to public sentiment. Yet few of the spurious friends of the late Alf Jarvis were less entitled to that distinction or that sympathy.

Jenny lived with her mother in the house opposite to that in which Alf had lodged. She

earned a livelihood by work in a chocolate factory, and was a good-looking, vivacious girl, who, despite her share of native coquetry and love of dress and amusement, had a robust imagination and a ballast of common sense that stood her in good stead in a narrow, perilous world where it is not always easy to be happy for long without being unwise. Her good looks and good humour won her plenty of admirers, but she was difficult to please.

She had owned to no preference for anybody until she began to walk out with Ben Gillet, and Ben's triumph was not lasting. She quarrelled with him frequently, and, at length, offended by some fancied slight, sent him away in a moment of pique, and apparently transferred her affections.

But Ben was not readily daunted. He was a dogged, steady-going fellow, a capable artisan, dwelling at a distance from the Row, and had come to know Jenny through meeting her at intervals as she walked to and from the chocolate factory. He went away when she sent him; but he returned, and returned again, with a tireless persistence that was presently rewarded; she found she did not care for his supplanter as she had cared for him, so he was forgiven and they were reconciled.

Then, after an interval, she broke with him

capriciously for a second time, and he departed into the wilderness of her displeasure, smarting under the knowledge that he had a new rival, who was far more dangerous than the old.

This new rival was none other than the redoubtable Alf Jarvis. Alf had set eyes upon Jenny, and, being moderately fascinated by her beauty and the challenge of her bright eyes, had pointedly honoured her with his attentions, and the fact that she was coy and exacting and not to be lightly won added an unwonted piquancy to his wooing, and made him the more bent upon winning her.

On her part, it was probably not so much that she cared for him as that she was flattered at being singled out for admiration by one who was so peculiarly notorious.

Before his solitary conviction had rendered the undue prominence too risky, Alf had been leader of a gang of young hooligans who were the terror of the neighbourhood; and since his release from durance he had been no less daringly lawless, but had carried out his exploits with a baffling cunning and secrecy that left the police no chance of entrapping him.

Rumour whispered that he was expert with a revolver, and, when a man was shot near by in a

street brawl, Alf was credited with the achievement; but, though he was arrested on suspicion, no revolver could be traced to him, and there was no tangible evidence of his guilt. He was handy also with a knife, and free of his threats to use it; wherefore he was held in respect, and more timorous spirits looked up to him, toadied to him, and, even while they hated him and his tyranny, were glad to boast of his friendship and swagger under his patronage.

It was no wonder, then, if Jenny was dazzled by the homage of so masterful a man. The wonder was that his dashing airs, the glamour of his crude greatness, the open hatred of one he had jilted and several he ignored for her sake, turned her head so little as they did.

For awhile, however, she was so far warped from her better self by his sinister influence that the sight of Ben Gillet's sombre, melancholy visage, when she flaunted past him in the streets, instead of touching her with compassion, only pleasantly titillated her preening self-complacency.

If Ben had simply given her up, she might have felt some irritation; that he should haunt her miserably, seeking to move her to relent, gratified her vanity, while the mood lasted, as it must have

gratified the Roman conqueror of old to see his hopeless captive shambling dejected by his chariot-wheel.

And now, suddenly, at this critical juncture, before she could be quite sure of her own heart or Alf could overpersuade her, some unknown hand had abruptly torn him out of her life for ever.

His tragic end filled her with horror and affected her with an emotional belief that she had really loved him. The tears she shed were tears of genuine sorrow. Her pity for him was so acute and she was so vividly conscious of the position she occupied in the public eye by reason of her tender association with the chief actor in this startling tragedy that, when the press reporters got hold of her name and put it about that she had been betrothed to him, she rather encouraged the idea than otherwise, and keenly appreciated the reputation and dignity that accrued to her from it.

This development of the situation seeming to make it imperative, she trimmed her hat with crape and bought herself a cheap black dress, and in these habiliments was treated with distinguished consideration at the inquest, where, red-eyed and weeping, her outward acquiescence in the position

making her grief and bereavement curiously real to her, she sat on a front bench between Alf's father and mother.

Later, she was the most attractive figure and a chief mourner at the funeral—a sensational, largely attended funeral, which was paid for out of the proceeds of a special smoking-concert held in the big room over "The Bold Robin Hood" at the end of the Row.

Altogether, it was a strange and grievous experience, not unmingled with a certain pleasant sense of complacency, of which Jenny was dimly ashamed even while she indulged it.

Nor was the whole affair buried at the funeral. It was kept very much alive by the circumstance that the police were still actively pursuing the murderer, and every now and then the papers announced darkly that they had obtained a clue and an arrest was momentarily expected.

But no arrest was ever made.

Alf had wronged many people and made numerous enemies; moreover, his companions were as brutal and lawless as himself. He might have been murdered out of revenge, or in the heat of a drunken fight—among a confusing multitude of such possibilities no trace of the culprit could be

detected, and by degrees the search began to be abandoned.

Meanwhile, though Ben Gillet made no attempt to intrude upon Jenny's misery, he had not lost sight of her. Again and again she met him as she walked to the factory or home from it, and his wan, unhappy face reproached her in spite of herself. But strong still in the importance attaching to her almost widowed state, and too proud to own it in a hurry even if she suspected she had been in any way duping herself, she steeled her heart against him and coldly discouraged such hesitant attempts as he made to renew acquaintance with her.

Once or twice, stung to desperation, he paused full in her path and spoke to her, but she froze him each time with the forbidding resentment of her gaze, and swept past without a word; till, crushed and reckless with despair, he could endure this state of things no longer, and forced her to make up her mind about him, once for all, by calling to see her in her own home.

The front door of the house stood always open, for the convenience of the various lodgers, so he entered at will, and, before she was aware of his presence, was in the room where she sat at the table sewing, alone.

"You needn't be afraid, Jenny," he said quietly. closing the door and standing with his back to it. "I must speak to you—you're breaking my heart, girl. I saw your mother go out, an' came in hoping to find you by yourself. I want you to tell me the plain truth—and have done with it."

After a quick glance at his tense white face, she bent over her sewing again with an assumption of indifference, but her hands trembled, the tears stung under her eyelids, and she was surprised at her own sudden, unaccountable weakness.

"You're still wearing black," he went on, with a dull composure. "I want to know, Jenny—what's it all mean—did you love him—that man, or is it that you are only sorry for him?"

"I shouldn't wear black for him if I didn't, should I?" she asked curtly.

"Do you really mean that?"

"Of course I do."

"But—but once you loved me, Jenny——"

"No, I never did, then!"

He waited, watching her thoughtfully.

"I've been mistaken, then?"

"I can't help that."

She tossed her head proudly.

"It's all been a mistake—between me and you?

You are quite, quite certain of that?" he urged anxiously. "Don't, for God's sake, fool me now, Jenny."

His terrible earnestness startled her, but she was in no yielding mood.

"Who's foolin' you? You've no right to come here bullyin' me, Ben Gillet, an' the sooner you take yourself off the better."

He sighed heavily.

"Very well," he returned. "But if I'd been sure of this before, Jenny—perhaps things might have gone different. I would never have brought sorrow on you. I never believed—I couldn't believe—you loved him. That's where it was——"

"It was no business of yours, anyhow," she protested hotly. "What right have you to come here sayin' this to me?——"

She bit her lip, and choked back a sob.

"I'll tell you, Jenny." His dull, grim calmness seemed to increase her agitation. "That night Jarvis was murdered I happened to be comin' across the Fields an' met him. He'd been drinkin', but he knew me, and shouted words to me it was bitter hard to bear. But he was drunk, an' I took no notice. I went on, but he turned an' walked jeering and callin' after me. I took no notice till

he shouted something about you—never mind what it was. He was a dirty swine and I knew it was a lie, but I couldn't stand it. I ran back, mad, an' smashed my fist into his face. Next minute his knife was out, an' he was on to me. I caught him, an' we rolled over atop of each other, an' in the middle of it I got his wrist an' wrenched the knife away——"

He stopped, and she stared at him aghast.

"I hated him," he continued in a strained whisper, "but I'd never thought to do him harm. He'd have had me, if I hadn't had him—and if I'd known what you've just told me I'd have let him, sooner than——" He paused, panting as if for breath, and resumed brokenly. "Now you know. It was me. I wanted you to tell me the plain truth, and now—I don't care to hide it any longer. I never meant to tell you. . . . But I don't care now. Nothing matters."

He struggled against the fierceness of his emotion and suppressed it.

"You can give me up, Jenny. That's why I'm telling you," he said quietly. "Give me up and I'll swing for it, and you'll not be troubled with me any more. Go on! . . . Here. There it is." With a hasty movement he flung a long-bladed

knife down on the table before her. "That's the knife. His knife. I'll stop here—while you go for the police."

He ceased, and stood with his breast heaving, dully resolved.

There was a moment of almost intolerable silence.

Then the slow tread of Mrs. Cripps returning sounded in the passage.

Instantly, Jenny started to her feet.

He caught the look in her eyes, and a new light kindled in his own.

"Ben!" she cried in an agony, under her breath. "I never meant it. It's my fault. Oh, it was never really him. . . . Hush!"

She broke off with a warning gesture as the door opened, and, snatching the knife from the table, thrust it into her pocket.

A CASH ACCOUNT

THE big kitchen of the lodging-house was getting crowded.

Two or three unpresentable guests stooped about the grate, one toasting a kipper in front of the fire, another scorching a scrag of beef over the top; a drab miscellany of derelicts, sodden and unwashed, or merely unwashed and tired, sat at the long deal table, gossiping monotonously or, lolling half-asleep, letting their pipes go out; or rousing to a tantalizing-sniff of the cooking and, with lazy glances toward the fire-place, dully speculating on forlorn chances of cadging a bite.

The air was rank with pungent tobacco smoke, and each new arrival added to the thickness of it. From time to time, one or other rose yawning and climbed heavily upstairs to bed in his allotted cubicle; while Mr. Harris, the proprietor, strolled in and out at intervals, with a subtly quick ear for rising disturbances and a masterful hand for putting them down. From intimate experience,

he knew precisely how far a quarrelsome lodger might be trusted before there was danger of his breaking into violence, and the instant that limit was reached he would stand listening intently, then suddenly point his formidable stick straight at the offender, and roar:

"That's enough! No more o' that here. Time you was in bed. 'Op it. Off you go upstairs. Stow yer jaw, if yer don't want me to break it for yer. Goin', or ain't yer?"

And, sulky or grinning, according to his mood, the man addressed nearly always went without further trouble.

No one looking at Mr. Harris could have guessed he was stone-blind; he was so familiar with every inch of his premises, patrolled them with such an easy, confident tread, and such an air of perfect self-reliance. Whenever he came into the kitchen his lodgers involuntarily modulated their voices, and those who had been noisiest eyed him dubiously, sometimes ducking as he passed, as if to evade his notice, for he was so uncannily acute that few were altogether convinced that he really could not see them.

Sunny George was one of the few. An old and fairly regular visitor, he sat smoking moodily,

with his chin in his hands, talking with nobody, and taking no interest in Mr. Harris's intermittent comings and goings. He spoke to nobody, until One-Legged Joe, lank and weedy and cheerful, stumped in fresh from the streets and dropped into a vacant seat beside him on the form.

"'Cheer, Sunny," Joe greeted him lightly. "'Ow's things?"

"Oh, damn!" Sunny George shook his hairy head and sighed.

"Any luck?"

"Broke to the wide."

"No use arstin' you to stand a old pal a wet, then?"

"That's what I was wonderin'."

"An' no use arstin' you, o' course, Stingy?" Joe nudged his other neighbour.

"Arstin' me what?" enquired Stingy, removing his pipe and wreathing his sly, unshorn visage in a sour grin.

"To stand two old pals a drink to go to bed on?"

"Don't find nobody in such a 'urry to stand me one," demurred Stingy. "I 'as to stand all my own, an' takes me all my time to do it."

They were interrupted by an outbreak of shrill voices on the stairs. One of the cookers at the fire

turned curiously, with his scrag of meat sizzling unheeded on the fork; the drowsiest sitters started into wakefulness and stared at each other or at Mr. Harris, who was making his round of the room at the moment and had paused with his stern face and terribly empty eyes turned toward the door-way.

And blundering in at the door-way came a couple of frowsy, ringleted Italians, grimacing and gesticulating excitedly in the heat of a fiery argument.

"It ees mine," reiterated the taller of them. "I peek it up."

"I see it first," insisted the shorter one. "I stoop to peek it up ven you push me and snatch——"

"I say it ees damn lie!"

"What's the trouble, Carlo?" demanded Sunny George, leaning across the man who divided him from the taller Italian. "Give the bloke what belongs to 'm, can't yer?"

"It not belong to heem," retorted Carlo. "I see eet in ze mud—von silver half-crown. I peek it up quick; zen Antonio, here, he say gif it to heem, he see it first, but I say, No, No, eet is mine——"

"Ah-h-h! Damn lies, damn lies!" interrupted Antonio furiously. "I see eet soonest than zis tief, and he push me avay and snatch eet, and I say mine, but he say No. Zen I say I haf my share, but he say No. He say I not see eet till he haf got it, but I say lies, damn lies!"

Quivering with passion and suddenly losing his self-control, he abruptly grappled with Carlo and made as if he would have rifled his pockets. They clutched each other and staggered and fell and rose together, catching and tearing at each other with a rapidly increasing frenzy, till Sunny George stepped in and, grasping Carlo by the arm and Antonio by the neck, deftly flung them apart. He had no sooner separated them, however, than they rushed together again, and, after joining in the scramble for a moment in a vain effort to part them, Sunny George withdrew and left the conflict to take its course. It took a panting and wrestling and scuffling course for a brief space, then Carlo wrenched himself free of his compatriot, clapped his hand to his pocket, and yelled:

"He haf rob me! He haf take my money. Tief! Ah-h-h!"

"Diavolo!" gasped Antonio, beside himself with resentment. "I take it not. Ha!"

They leaped at each other, and with sudden outcries of alarm and horror the men about the table sprang up; a form was overturned with a crash, and they scattered back in a widening circle against the walls—all but the two glaring, spluttering combatants, who were left in a clear space, dancing and dodging at one another on tiptoe, each with a gleam of steel in his hand and viciously alert for an opening.

In the heat of the dispute everybody had forgotten Mr. Harris, but now some of the onlookers became aware of him, where he stood, strained and taut, with a menacing, closely attentive look darkening his rugged face.

"It's knives, Mr. Harris!" babbled one of the cowering mob. "It'll be murder—murder, if you don't stop 'em."

The rest watched fascinated, while the two crouching figures circled and feinted, their blades flashing and twinkling perilously, as they darted forward and struck and swung their lithe bodies out of reach of the strokes; while Mr. Harris towered, dumb and motionless as a statue, his features sharpened to that curious listening acuteness, as if his whole soul were in his ears, hearkening after the light pad, pad, pad and shuffle of

the combatants' feet, till, with a mighty sweep, before either was prepared, his big stick whirled down with a marvellous accuracy of aim and stretched Antonio with his hands clasped on his head, and, swift as lightning, flew up and down in a second stroke, and, the knife jerking from his quivering fingers, Carlo shrieked with agony and writhed, hugging his own right arm.

As the knife struck the floor Mr. Harris, shrewdly alive to the sound of its fall, put his foot on it.

"Now then," he raged portentously, "out you go, yer blasted greasers, both of yer! Clear! If there's to be any murdering here, by God, I'll do it myself! Out you go! Are yer going?" Listening sharply, he knew where they were by the sound of their muted cursings and smothered lamentations, and, prompting them with curt jabs of his stick, blustered, "Out of it! D'yer hear? An' don't ask for your money back at the door, becos you won't git it. I shall keep that to pay me for my trouble. It's a ruddy menagerie you want, not a respectable lodging-house. Git!— None o' yer lip. Don't care whether 'e's robbed you or you've robbed 'im. None o' my business. One of yer's got the 'arf-crown, and you can settle about that between yer outside. There's

more room there. Here! I've 'ad enough o' this——"

The big stick whirled aloft, and, as if someone had pressed a button and set them going, Carlo and Antonio rolled aside and scrambled to their feet, as the blow thudded on the floor. But, their hysterical protestations guiding him, Mr. Harris advanced upon them with a sinister assurance, rating, bullying, and feeling for them, striking and hitting as often as he missed, and so shepherded them from the room, up the narrow stairs, along the passage above, ruthlessly past the pay-box, and into the street.

Quiet settled down on the kitchen. The lodgers resumed their seats at the table, pipes were relighted, and the bearings of what had happened were discussed with a leisurely and great tranquillity.

"Leggy," Sunny George observed, at length, under cover of the general conversation, "I can stand yer one now, if yer want it."

"Oh, that's where it went, is it?" Joe winked knowingly. "I'm on."

They sauntered casually toward the door, but Stingy came discreetly after them and laid a detaining hand on George's arm.

"'Arf a mo, matey! I seen yer take it," he said huskily. "Ain't yer goin' to stand me one as well?"

"Seen me take what?" asked George, with simulated innocence.

Stingy grinned.

"My pal there, Peter the Pedlar," he whispered significantly, "he seen yer take it, too. Better arst 'im to come an' have one with us, then there won't be no difficulties."

"'Ow many more of yer?" grumbled Sunny George. "Oh, well, if you seen me, an' so long as it's only four of us—come on!" He signalled to Peter with a jerk of his head. "But if there's any more comin' in on this treat, blimey, I'll give the blarsted coin to Mr. 'Arris an' wash my 'ands of it."

They passed unostentatiously up the dark stairs and out of the house. Seeing the Italians still wrangling in the distance, with a pair of policemen now joining in the argument, they turned in the opposite direction and filed into a bleary little tavern a few doors up the street.

"What's it to be?" asked George expansively.

"Make it a pint all round," urged Stingy, "seein' it's found money an' you don't lose by it."

"You mean you don't lose by it." George eyed him scornfully, but yielded with a laugh. "'Ope you'll be as free with yer own, Stingy, next time I meets yer. Landlord, four beers—pints."

The landlord did some sleight of hand with the beer-pull, and conjured four foaming tankards on to the counter, and Sunny George, after some fumbling in his vest pocket, slapped the half-crown on the sloppy counter.

"Well, lads, here's to us!" he cried cheerily, "an' may we always get drinks as easily."

The four tankards were lifted and put down more than half empty.

In the interval, the landlord had paused on his way to the cash register to give a startled look at the coin in his hand. He showed it hurriedly to the stalwart barman, muttered some brisk instructions to him, then returned to the counter and threw the coin down on it discontentedly.

"What d'yer call this?" he demanded. "Take it from me—if you think I'm a damn fool, you're mistaken. What's the game?"

George picked the shining coin up gingerly, and as he examined it his jaw dropped.

"Why," he faltered, "what is it? I took it for a bleed'n 'arf-crown."

"Oh! well," sneered the landlord, "you don't git me to take it for that. You never see a 'arf-crown before, I suppose, an' think it's all right to 'ave one with a church on the back of it, an' a 'ole to put a bit o' ribbon through, do yer?"

Sunny George swore softly to himself.

"I never noticed the damn thing before," he said, "an' it's all the money I've got, guvner."

"Money!" snarled the landlord.

"Nothin' to do with me, mister," interposed Stingy. "My friend, 'ere, he's standin' treat, so you'll 'ave to settle with 'im."

"Shall I?" enquired the landlord dangerously. "We'll see! You're all in this swindle, an' you can all settle with the cops. I don't care which pays, but, if one of yer don't, I'll put the whole pack of yer away, an' quick, too."

Stingy turned, with a notion of departing, but the door was shut and the stalwart barman stood with his back against it.

"No business o' mine, I tell yer," blustered Stingy. "I shan't pay. You no right to stop me. Let me out. Come on!"

The barman stood immovable, and the landlord leaned calmly over the other bar to address an invisible customer in the next compartment.

"Just look out o' that door," he said, "an' see if there's a slop outside. Arst 'im to step in. I want 'im for a bunch o' crooks I've got 'ere."

Whereupon, after a despairing outburst of indignation, Stingy collapsed—he counted a pile of coppers into the landlord's palm, the barman stood aside, and the four filed sadly out.

"I believe you knowed all along what it was," Stingy raved.

"How could I?" protested George. "I seen the Italian tap 'is pocket, an', when I 'ad the chance, I nipped the money out an' into my own without stoppin' to look at it. I never looked at it till the landlord showed it to us. An' you're the only one of us that's got any other money—an', besides it's yer own fault. You would come. I never, arst yer."

"Where is it? Give it to me," Stingy insisted savagely. "I've 'ad to pay for it. It's mine."

"Oh, you shall 'ave it, all right ole pal." And Sunny George gave it to him. "You'll never be able to pass it, but if ever you wants to sign the pledge it'll save you the price of a medal, that will."

ON THE WAY BACK

I

"Oh, well, she's done better without him."

"An' bin much happier, she says."

"Yes, and it's comin' home to him now. See how *he* likes bein' served same as he served her."

The three gossips shook their bonnetless heads in unison, and fretted the sunny morning with a cackle of ironical laughter.

"But he deserves it," added one of them, "an' she didn't."

"She had to work mortal hard—but she's done well. Providence looks arter its own, Mrs. Hoole."

"Sometimes, maybe."

"It's looked arter her, anyhow. It ain't every woman as could have managed as comfortable as she's done these seven years, since he took up with that good-for-nothing hussy an' left her."

"She's had luck as well as pluck; that's where it is. One ain't much good without the other,

an' she's had both. She started chicken-farmin' an' market-gardenin' to keep herself, after Tom Pardoe chucked her—that was pluck. But she hadn't been doin' it a year when that miserly old uncle of hers died an' left her a nice bit o' money an' his pony an' trap—that was luck. She couldn't ha' bought that extry plot o' ground next to her own if she hadn't had that money, an' she couldn't have travelled so fur round to all the villages gettin' orders an' deliverin' the goods if she hadn't had that trap."

"Yes, an' if Tom Pardoe had never left her, he'd have spent all her money for her as fast as she made it; so she's had luck all round."

"That's right. Wonder what he'll be doin' now—now that he's bin left hisself?" They laughed in chorus again. "Did you say anything to her about him, Mrs. Hoole? D'yer think she knows about him?"

"Oh, she knows well enough. Everybody knows. I did just drop a hint to her, but you know what she is—she won't never talk of him—always pretends she don't care what he does, or where he is, or anything about him."

"Perhaps she don't."

"P'raps not."

But Mrs. Hoole said it doubtfully, and something of her doubt lay under the silence that fell upon them all as they stood at the street corner and arched their hands over their eyes to stare thoughtfully after the distant cart in which Mrs. Pardoe was jolting away out of the little east-country town up the dusty white high-road towards home.

She was a tall, hard-knit, shapely figure of a woman verging on fifty; the firm brown hands that held the reins were roughened with toil; her hair, hidden now in a flapping sunbonnet, was streaked with grey, and across her broad brow and at the corners of her mouth were sharp-cut lines that had come more of trouble than of age.

Past outlying cottages, away out of Walden town between a mile or more of green hedgerows, over the canal bridge into Highbeach village, through the thriving, straggling village street of squat shops and tiled houses, where she knew and exchanged greetings with everybody she met; out over another bridge, up another mile or so of dusty high-road, and then the pony stopped of its own accord at the wooden gates of her solitary cottage.

A small, thatched cottage of wood and plaster,

standing, in the middle of an extensive kitchen garden, with a wide path up to the door and branching round to certain wooden, tarred outhouses at the rear. A dozen pear trees on one side of the garden and twice as many plum trees on the other helped to break the monotony of the vast stretch of flat landscape thereabouts, and took the edge of bleakness off the desolate look of the cottage itself. A loutish hired man, who was digging potatoes, came to open the gate, and, leaving him to stable the pony and put the cart away, Mrs. Pardoe went indoors.

A sturdy, ancient handmaiden, who kept the cottage in order and assisted to cultivate the chickens and the garden, met her in the narrow lobby with a letter.

"For me, Betty?" cried Mrs. Pardoe, taking it from her. "Why, who's this bin writin' to me?"

The envelope was addressed in a crude, unpractised hand and bore the London postmark. She had not expected it, and wondered that its coming surprised her so little; but, though she still affected not to recognise the writing, instead of following Betty into the kitchen she shut herself in the spotless, prim parlour, and opened the letter in secret.

Betty thought she would mention it over dinner; but she did not; she was unusually preoccupied all the afternoon, though she went about her work much as usual.

Next morning, she drove off with her baskets full of eggs and fruit and vegetables, and a chicken or two that had been killed and plucked ready for roasting; and she came home with the same ruminant mood still upon her. After dinner that day, she withdrew into the parlour again and was there alone, very quiet, until dusk was gathering; then she came out carrying a sealed letter, and, without a word to anybody, tramped down the long road to the village and posted it herself.

II

Before she could bring herself to the writing of that letter Rachel Pardoe had gone back in remembrance over many things it was hard to forgive and harder to forget.

She had married, when she was nearly thirty, a man who was in every way unsuited to her. Why she had loved him, why in her inmost heart she loved him even yet, she could not have said. But she loved him, and married him, and for

twelve years they lived together in Walden, near the river.

Tom Pardoe was skipper of a sailing barge that carried cargo to and from London. He was rarely at home for more than three or four days at a time, while his barge was reloading at the wharf, and it was not long before both Rachel and he began to wish those intervals were fewer and farther apart. For she was scrupulously neat in her habits, and rigidly religious, whilst he was slovenly and disposed to dissipation. She was troubled by his wickedness, and he by her piety; she would go to church twice on a Sunday, while he lounged at home half-dressed, till the "Jolly Tar" was opened, and cursed the cold dinner he had to eat because she had scruples against cooking on the Sabbath.

They had no children. He made a great grievance of that, and, though she was silent about it, it was as great a grievance to her. He was strangely fond of children, who invariably took to him, and she often told herself, with a dull ache at her heart, that if there had been little ones of their own to welcome him on his home-comings things would have gone far better with them both; the "Jolly Tar" might have seen less of him, and

they would have won a hold upon his affection that she alone could never hope to obtain.

By imperceptible degrees, they became almost entirely estranged; and there befell a day when his barge returned to its moorings at the wharf near by, but he did not come home to her. She was not disquieted much at first; more than once lately he had preferred the bar parlour of the "Jolly Tar" and his bunk in the cabin of his barge to her austere company and the immaculate neatness of his own cottage, and she was too proud to seek him or to enquire after him.

But he had never been back to her since then. Within a day or two it came to her that he had taken up with a young woman whom rumour had before associated with him, and that he had got together another home not far off along the riverside and was living with her there.

Rachel sent back some money he posted to her, and uttered no regret or complaint, and the neighbours told each other that she had ceased to care for him, and was glad to be free of the burden of his follies. But, then, they never saw her in her quiet room, when the world was shut out and she was secure from curious eyes.

While he was absent from Walden on his next

voyage she quitted the house that had been his and crossed the river to the solitary cottage beyond Highbeach, and there settled down, with the practical common-sense that was native to her, to earn a living for herself.

In the seven years that followed, at rare intervals, when she was driving into Walden, she had passed her husband in the streets and affected not to see him. He made no attempt to speak to her, and she only knew from casual talk that he was still sojourning contentedly with the woman for whom he had deserted her, and that they had two children.

Less than a month ago, as she drove into the town, she had seen him, all alive with boisterous merriment, running races with his boy on the high-road; and, driving back, she caught a glimpse of him over the hedges, rolling and rioting in the deep grass with both his children, himself as noisily and childishly happy as either. That was the bitterest moment she had known, and the old ache was renewed in her heart at the sight of them.

They were not hers, those children, and she felt that, while they lived, they would bind him assuredly to the woman who had taken her place. And yet here, at last, when it had seemed so certain

she had lost him for ever, he had written to ask if she could forgive him and let him come home to her.

"I daresay you have heard," he wrote, "how that bitch has served me. While I was away last voyage she married old Stevens the boat-builder by licence—actually married the old fool. Of course, she's only after his money and must have bewitched him. She made him promise she should keep the children; that's all I care about. If I could get them she might go and good riddance. But she's too cunning, and I can't get them, and don't suppose I could even if I went to law. . . . It serves me right, Rachel, and makes me guess what it's been to you. I treated you shameful and am so lonely and wretched I'd shoot myself as soon as not. I spoilt your life, and now she's spoilt mine. I don't know what to do. If you can let bygones be bygones, Rachel, and give me another chance, I will promise on my oath to be a better man to you. I am older than I was, and I miss you terrible. If it hadn't been for the children I'd not have stopped with her this long. I never cared for her like I loved you. . . ."

She tried not to remember what her life had been with him, and would not think how little his

promises were worth; he had offered her the one excuse she had always allowed for him and had touched her by giving words to the blind belief she had always clung to—that he never loved the other woman as he had loved her.

She could not resolve to answer him immediately, as he asked her to, but her heart was empty and hungry, and she knew she must yield. She held out for a night and a day; then her pride was altogether broken down, and she wrote to him, and told him he could come.

III

From the back door of her cottage Rachel could look out over the vast estuary of the Blackwater, widening in one direction seaward, and in the other split by a long, jutting island into a broad and a narrow channel, the broad making a sweep round the farther shore of the island up to Walden, the narrow running past the nearer shore of it and tapering on through Highbeach; whilst, nearer still, streams and dykes and gullies came branching inland to overflow when the tide was high and fill the treacherous pits and hollows that intersected

the marshy, sodden fields that breathed their mists in nightly over her garden palings.

Watching from the back of her cottage two days after she had written to Tom Pardoe, Rachel saw his barge grow out of the seaward haze and, gliding up the broad waterway that led to Walden, vanish behind the island. She knew it was his barge by the flag at the mast-head and by the brown patch on the big red sail. A few weeks ago she had seen it go past like that, and it had meant nothing to her; now it meant more than she could have said.

To-night he would be home again.

The sky was heavy with clouds, and as the twilight deepened a wind rose and, blowing across from the far-off opposite shore, whipped the incoming tide into crested waves and flung them splashing and shattering high up the pebbly beach that fringed the fields below; and in every pause of the wind a sleety rain fell.

So with her own hands Rachel kindled a cheery fire in the parlour, and, bringing them from some secret hiding-place, ranged on the mantelpiece portraits of Tom, and of Tom and herself together, that had not seen the light since he went away from her last.

She was anxious that everything should speak

a welcome to him when he came; that he should feel, as she was feeling, the tide was on the turn, and would bear them back to something of the happiness that had been theirs when they were younger.

At nine o'clock she sent old Betty to bed, and postponed supper until he was there to have it with her. She replenished the fire in the parlour and sat by it listening for his footfall on the path without; but only the wind soughed round the creaking walls, and the intermittent rain pattered dismally on the window.

She did not begin to give up hope of him until eleven. Then she was seized with a dread that he had gone to that other woman and succeeded in making his peace with her; or had lingered late drinking, as his habit was of old, and with this suspicion came a cold fear that perhaps she had been foolish to relent—that, being still as he had been, he would return merely to mar her peaceful, comfortable days with the incompatibilities and discords that had so wearied her before.

But the next minute she was reproaching herself for judging him so harshly, soothing herself with a calculation that he could not have received her letter. She ought to have replied instantly, as he

had begged her to; the unkind doubts of him and her false pride were to blame for this disappointment, and her letter going too late had not been delivered in London till after he had sailed.

The longer she reflected on it the clearer she saw that this was what must have happened, and, in a pleasant ecstasy of remorse, she made up her mind to humble herself by way of atonement and drive to-morrow to where his barge was moored in Walden and explain and bring him home with her.

Withal, she sat waiting for him, forlornly hopeful, till the wheezy grandfather clock in the kitchen struck twelve; then she went reluctantly to bed.

But sleep was impossible to her. She lay hearing the wind blow in wild gusts across the heaving waters and across the dreary, marshy wastes where the treacherous pits and hollows were full to the brim with overflowings of the sea. Once the door downstairs rattled so loudly, and she was so sure that somebody was knocking and calling, that she threw a shawl round her hurriedly and went down with a candle. The wind dashed the door open, directly she unlatched it, and blew the light out, but nobody was there; nothing was there but the rainy wind that plunged howling in upon her from the hollow blackness of the night.

The day broke sunless, and Rachel was out feeding her chickens an hour before breakfast.

As she moved mechanically about her accustomed tasks, a sound of voices reached her, and, standing to look, she saw three labourers, who had been shoring up an embankment, stooping above a motionless bulk which they had just drawn out from one of the steep, deep pits in the field to the rear of her garden palings.

The air was so still that she could hear clearly what they were saying from two hundred yards away.

"I seen him, poor chap, late last night drinkin' in the 'Jolly Tar,' in Highbeach yonder. He'd had more than was good for him an' couldn't hardly keep his feet even then."

"Ah! He must ha' missed the road in the dark an' come blunderin' across the marsh here an' simply stepped head over heels into the pit, poor devil."

"Can't leave it lyin' here. What we best do with it?"

They dropped their tones till she could not hear what they said; but she knew, for one of them had half turned round and was pointing to her cottage.

THE LAST CHAPTER

THE yellow blinds were drawn down to shut out the fierce glare of the sun; the open windows seemed gasping in suffocation, but could catch no breath of air; and the long, quiet ward, with its dreary vista of bedridden patients, was oppressively close.

Two Sisters, chatting in listless undertones, sat by a small table near the open doorway. Dull yellow shadows of the blinds chequered the floor at regular intervals; a sickly miasma of hyacinths and medicines thickened the dry, hot atmosphere and put a thought of death into the brooding quiet of the place.

Presently a door slammed somewhere on the other side of the building, and a flying echo flapped and fluttered headlong down the great stone corridor without, plunged into the waiting silence, and was instantly stifled.

Then another sound grew out of the stillness,

and the echoing corridor was fretted by crisp footfalls.

"Chaplain," muttered one of the nurses; and the other mechanically took up some sewing.

The Chaplain came in—a spare, pale man of fifty, with large, mild eyes and a pensive kindly expression. He shook hands with the nurses, and stood talking with them in undertones.

"And how is the new patient—No. 20?"

"He had a good night and seemed a little better this morning, but doctor says there is no hope—he can't last many days."

"Poor fellow!"

He moved off along the melancholy avenue of narrow beds, glancing to right and left on weary, white faces of men who were asleep, and lingering awhile, here and there, to speak in sympathetic murmurs to such as happened to be awake. No. 20 had watched his approach with evident interest, and greeted his arrival with a wan, peculiar smile which the other was puzzled to interpret.

"You were asleep when I came through the ward yesterday," observed the Chaplain, seating himself by the bedside.

"Not really. I saw you," No. 20 said feebly, "but I kept my eyes shut—I didn't want to have

anything to say to anybody just then—I was feeling pretty bad."

"You are better to-day?"

"Not much. . . . I was sorry, though, yesterday, after you'd gone. I only saw you for a moment, but it struck me at once that I'd seen you before. When I opened my eyes you'd passed on. I worried myself to death trying to think where it was I'd seen you—and couldn't; till I asked Sister what your name was."

"Yes? And do you know me?"

"Don't you remember me at all?"

The Chaplain looked critically at the shrunken, haggard face on the pillow, and shook his head. His eyes wandered to the card hung above the bed, and he read the patient's name on it—"Richard Fairfax."

"You don't know the name," said the other, following his gaze. "I've changed it once or twice since we met last. You knew me by my own respectable, original name, Richard Marston."

"Never!" The Chaplain started and, leaning forward, scanned the worn features again, with a twilight recognition glimmering in his eyes. "I should never have known you. You are sadly changed."

"In more ways than one," Marston laughed wryly. "And the beard makes a big difference."

He reached out a wasted hand, which the Chaplain grasped with a sort of shy cordiality, and, the first excitement of their strange meeting having spent itself, they drifted easily into intimate talk of far-away days and old friends.

"I suppose I've come to as bad an end as the worst of them," said Marston.

The Chaplain muttered deprecatingly.

"But it is the end. No good pretending it isn't!" cried the sick man with feeble recklessness. "I shall be carried out of here feet first within a week, and I'm not sorry either. I'm about tired of everything."

A spasm of pain distorted his features, and brought a clammy sweat oozing through his parched skin.

"What have I been doing with myself all these years?" he answered when the agony subsided. "You wouldn't like to hear most of it. I've been all over the world, doing everything I ought not to have done nearly all the time. I've just gone to the devil, and you know who first sent me on the way there, don't you?"

The Chaplain maintained a grave silence.

"We were simple and she fooled us both," chuckled Marston, fluctuating momentarily between flippancy and earnestness. "I used to hate you then, because I thought you were the lucky man. But she never cared a straw for either of us. My God!—but I loved her then, Ireton! I don't believe you ever cared for her as I did—nobody could. She was playing with us—no more heart than a fish, damn her! Sorry. . . . Of course, she took that other fellow—I forget his name—for his money. It was impossible to believe it of her—then. Youth—youth, how good it is, but what an ass, Ireton! When I heard it, I could have shot myself. Went mad, straight off, and I've been mad, one way or another, ever since. . . . It burnt you a little, too, I suppose?"

"At the time," the Chaplain grudgingly admitted.

"Ah! But you were one of the quiet sort, who never catch anything too bad to be cured by a poultice. I daresay it spoilt your appetite for a day; then you got up next morning, combed your hair, put on a clean collar, and . . . by the way, though, you were going in for the Law in those days, weren't you? How did you come to adopt the Church?"

The Chaplain blushed.

"I think we have talked quite enough. Too long," he said nervously. "The doctor will be blaming me for letting you excite yourself."

Marston glanced up at him curiously, and his heavy eyes twinkled.

"Don't say she had anything to do with it!"

The Chaplain flushed and frowned, and shook his head.

"Well," Marston went on, with a grim archness, "it's a queer drink that makes one man drunk and another sober. . . . Don't go for a minute, old fellow. It doesn't excite me a bit to talk about her now—how could it after all these years? It used to, I admit. But I am no love-sick youngster now. There have been other women since her—too many of them. I'd about forgotten her till the sight of you yesterday reminded me. One time I was always remembering, and trying hard not to remember, her voice, her eyes. . . . I believed I used to think of her, even when I cursed her and said she'd sold herself to the highest bidder, as you might think of an angel in heaven, and everything I did to forget her seemed to sink me farther away from her. What sentimental loonies we all are, Ireton! Do you know, even yet, when I think

about her—I was thinking of her in the night (all through you reminding me)—it's rather like thinking of prayers you've given up saying. You know how I mean. . . . Have you seen anything of her—since?"

The Chaplain shook his head.

"Twenty years," said Marston, musingly. . . . "Ever heard of her?"

"In a way—occasionally. Her husband, the Honourable Paul Ainsleigh——"

"That's the name. I couldn't think of it."

"He is a prominent man in politics, and she is popular in society. I saw in the papers a few days ago that they have been travelling but are back in town again."

"Here—in London? Oh, of course, they would have a place here."

"In Grosvenor Square."

"I can't imagine her in London. I always see her in that sunny old garden—you remember the garden?—and now and then, once upon a time, the sight of flowers made my heart ache."

The Chaplain coughed, and referred to his watch; and being, by now, fatigued and sleepy, Marston made no further effort to detain him.

Their common misfortune was, in some subtle,

indefinable fashion, as a tie of brotherhood betwixt them. They had compassion for each other, each knowing by personal experience what the other had suffered. Ireton, whose memories of the past had long been frozen into silence, was stirred and disquieted by the fervid utterance this friendless outcast gave to regrets that had once been also his. It broke up the ice of many winters and set old founts of feeling flowing darkly again through his veins. It unsettled him; troubled him; withal, he was strangely drawn towards this man, who was so linked with his dead yesterdays, and anxious for his welfare.

Late at night he went to the door of the dim ward to ask after him; and next morning he saw, with a genuine concern, that he was much altered for the worse. His eyes were bright and restless, his gaunt face greyer, his hand more feverish.

"I was hoping you'd come," he said hoarsely. "I had almost made up my mind to send for you."

"I'd have come earlier if I had known."

"I say, I dreamt about her last night. Seemed too real to be a dream. Odd, wasn't it? Then I woke up, and couldn't get her out of my mind, and it kept me awake. I kept thinking and thinking of her, till all that old business was as near as if it

had only happened last week. Do you know . . . I want to ask a favour, Ireton. . . . I say, I hope you won't think me delirious or a hopeless lunatic, will you?"

He laughed awkwardly, and, before the other could answer, resumed:

"I've got a most awful hankering to see her again. A sort of hungry, thirsty longing to see her again, old chap. I don't understand it, but it has taken such hold on me that I can't get rid of the idea. I simply feel I must see her once more before I've done with everything. A sick man's fancy, I expect, but it's no good—I can't shake it off. Do you think she would come if she knew? I believe she would."

He spoke rapidly, eagerly, yet in such weak, muffled tones that, though the patient in the next bed was awake and listening, he could not overhear what was said.

"It would not be wise," began Ireton, vaguely scared by the suggestion. "It would only upset you. It would be very painful——"

"No, it wouldn't. Not now. I know I haven't got more than a day or two left—I might go off to-day, and I feel somehow as if I must see her—just for the last time. We're not likely to meet

afterwards," he laughed grimly, "and it seems as if I'd made up my mind I can't go without seeing her once more. If I can see her—I shan't care then—I'll be satisfied. . . . Look here, Ireton, will you go and ask her? Don't say you won't, and don't try to persuade me not to see her. It keeps me all unsettled—wanting to see her. You'd go and try, if you knew how I feel."

He was so tremulously eager, so piteously in earnest, that Ireton had not the heart to refuse or to reason with him, and, seeing his halting attempts at dissuasion were completely futile, yielded and was gone, and speeding in a taxi towards Grosvenor Square before he fairly realised the extremely unusual and delicate character of his mission.

One minute he was overwhelmed with a sense of his folly in thus humouring the extravagant whim of a man who was too ill to know quite what he was doing, and he was seized with a fear that she would consider his request an impertinence and resent it; but the next moment he was reproving himself for crediting her with so little womanly sympathy. Then, in a flash, his mind was dazzled with a vision of her as he had known her—gracious and sweet and girlishly beautiful. So recollecting her, he recollected also wild,

passionate things he had said to her, and how she had once given herself to his arms and he had thought he was happy in her love, and he shrank ashamedly now, as at the thought of some indelicacy, from the prospect of seeing her again, and could not have forced himself to go on if he had not been haunted by those sleepless eyes that were watching for his return.

Every nerve in his body was quivering with the intensity of his excitement. Over and over again he asked himself: Would she recognise him? How would she receive him? What should he say to her? Remembrance of the witchery of her presence began alternately to draw him on and to repel him, and, still agitated by these bewildering impulses, he presently found himself knocking at the door of the house in Grosvenor Square.

He did not send in his name, but bade the footman tell Mrs. Ainsleigh that the Chaplain of St. Simeon's Hospital urgently desired to see her.

As he mechanically followed the man upstairs, after losing his last hope while he waited for his message to be taken in, his bewilderment increased to a sort of frenzy, till he became aware, with a curious sense of having suddenly revived from a swoon, that he was in a spacious, pleasantly

appointed drawing-room, and that a portly lady, who had risen at his entrance, was cooingly, somewhat gushingly wishing him good morning.

She was utterly strange to him. She was stout of figure and plump of face; an affable indifference peered from her placid eyes; her features were rather blunt and coarse, and her cheeks were artistically powdered.

"Mrs. Ainsleigh?"

It was himself that spoke, yet the voice had an alien sound.

"Ye-es. Won't you sit down?"

He being a clergyman from a hospital she vaguely anticipated an appeal for some kind of patronage.

"I have called," he stammered. "I have ventured to call on an errand which—which—for which I trust you will forgive me. It is most unusual, but—I have called on behalf of a patient at St. Simeon's Hospital—a Mr. Richard Marston."

"Ye-es? I seem to know the name——"

She smiled vacuously, and paused for him to proceed.

To sit there and regard this woman, grown so unlike all he had ever known and dreamed of her,

numbed and stupefied him. He had never foreseen such a grotesque transformation, and could not convince himself of its reality. Yet he knew well enough it was she, and was stung with an odd humiliation that this should be his saint, his goddess, the woman who had cast so deep a shadow over his life and influenced it so profoundly.

"Mr. Richard Marston," he repeated absently; then, recovering himself—"Mr. Marston used to know you—many years ago, before you were married."

"I have known so many men," she laughed self-consciously. "Ye-es. The name is familiar to me. How interesting! How sad! Of course—yes, there was a Mr. Marston—I knew him very well. Dear, dear! And is he in the hospital? Not very ill, I hope? Nothing dangerous?"

As briefly as might be, Ireton disposed of her enquiries, and made her acquainted with the object of his call.

"Really? And he wants to see me again? How very romantic of him! I daresay he has told you we used to be boy and girl sweethearts—nothing serious," she smiled archly. "Oh, yes, I remember him very—very well. And he has asked—dear me, how strange of him!"

"It is strange—it is—it must seem presumptuous," faltered Ireton. "I would never have consented to come with such a message but—he is dying—he is friendless—nearly friendless. He cannot live another day and is so very anxious just to see you—for old times' sake——"

"How sad—how terribly sad! Poor man! I am so sorry. I don't know what to say, but in such very sad circumstances I don't see how I can refuse. It is—well, after all these years—it is most curious he should wish to see me. But—what shall I do? . . . Very well. Would you like me to come with you now? I suppose I ought to—I must. If you will wait a few minutes while I get ready—I shall not keep you long."

Left alone, Ireton sat mute and numbed, past analysing his sensations or feeling any more, until she returned to accompany him.

All emotion was exhausted in him for the present, except one of thankfulness that she had not recognised him. She chatted amiably as they rode together in the taxi, and he answered her, but precisely what she said and what he replied he could never afterwards recall.

Their arrival sent a little thrill of surprise rippling ahead of them all along the ward. The

thin, sharp rustle of her silks summoned ghostly faces up from among white bedclothes to right and left, and glassy eyes stared at them as they passed. But no eyes stared so wonderingly as did those of No. 20; Ireton was conscious that the light faded from them suddenly, that their troubled glances wavered from himself to her, and he evaded them, for he could not bear to see in them any reflection of his own sufferings.

He escorted her to the bedside, and said quietly:

"This is Mr. Marston, Mrs. Ainsleigh."

She clasped the man's lean hand effusively, and putting up her pince-nez graciously inspected him.

"And is it really Mr. Marston? I declare I should not have known you! You are so entirely different—but then, of course, you have been ill, poor man, and illness does make such a difference. You must take care of yourself, and I hope you will soon be better. I hope you are well looked after?" She swept the ward with her glasses. "Beautifully clean and airy, is it not? And are you comfortable here? So glad. It is so very long since we met. You have had some great misfortune to bring you to this—but I must not ask you about that now; I can see you are not strong enough to talk. Such a long time—you will, no

doubt, notice changes in me. Ah, dear!" she sighed. "I do not forget the old times, and I am sorry to find you so poorly."

Ireton strolled away beyond hearing. Her rapid tones and shallow vivacity irritated him, jarred upon him less because of their unlikeness to the looks and tones of the girl he had known than because, in some incongruous fashion, they actually were like them. Yearning to escape from sight and sound of her, he wandered up and down the gloomy corridor outside, peering in at the door from time to time, until he saw she was about to depart. Then, having accompanied her downstairs and handed her into the waiting taxi, he went back irresolutely, and sat down by Marston's bed.

For several minutes neither of them spoke.

Marston lay with his eyes closed, but Ireton was aware that he was not asleep, and by and by he glanced up and said, as if continuing a conversation:

"And you never told her who you were?"

"There was no need."

Marston lay still, except for an occasional twitching of his lips.

"Good God!" he ejaculated suddenly. "I

made sure you must have made a mistake—it completely took my breath away at first!" He broke into low, irrepressible laughter. "Well, perhaps I'm the better off of the two of us after all, old chap. I've seen her and—I can do my dying comfortably now. She promised to come again—but I hope I shall have gone before she comes. I say—what damned fools we've been, Ireton."

The Chaplain made as if he would speak, but said nothing.

"You're sore about it. No wonder. I don't care so much myself, somehow. But fancy!"—the shrunken, bony figure was convulsed with silent laughter—"fancy you going to heaven and me to hell for such a woman as that!" He laughed still in silence, till the tears ran down his cheeks. "I can't help thinking," he checked his merriment, and added with an unctuous chuckle, "I wonder which of us'll meet her?"

OF TWO EVILS

I

It was done, and he was a murderer.

The thought spoke, as it were, in his mind—a low, awe-stricken whisper—and Nat Peplow heard it vaguely, as one reviving from a swoon hears voices speak beside him without grasping what they say.

Stupefied, his brain strangely awhirl, he stood staring vacantly down at the motionless figure of the woman who, a moment before, had flung up her arms with a shrill cry and fallen silent.

The slim, keen knife slipped from his nerveless fingers and rolled on the floor. Glancing aside at it, he noticed the red smear on the end of its blade, but did not stoop to pick it up again. He was dully wondering whether anyone had heard the frightened death-shriek that still rang in his ears; but there was no hurry of approaching footsteps, no answering call of alarm; the whole house was very quiet.

It was done, and he was a murderer.

He started, roused himself, and gasped, as if a douche of cold water had been splashed on his face. The thought in his mind had spoken louder and he heard it and understood its dreadful meaning, and shrank from the mute body, shuddering. He was afraid, but not repentant.

This had been no act of momentary madness. He had contemplated the doing of it often during the last few weeks; he had planned it deliberately; in the secret darkness of his mind he had slain this woman several times before, glorying in the deed, revelling in the ecstasy of so easing his heart and getting free for ever of jealous fears and furies that had long tormented him day and night.

It was done, and he was a murderer.

Yet he had loved her passionately. It was for love not hate of her that he had burdened his soul with this crime. She had left him no alternative; no alternative that was possible to him; he must have lost her in this way or another, and he had put the dread of heaven and hell from him and chosen this.

When he perpetrated the tragedy in imagination, however, there had always been two figures lying on the floor of the sordid little shop parlour; he had

used the knife twice. But here, in practice he had used it once only, all his frenetic courage seeming to have spent itself in that one stroke. And, the crisis passing, he remained to face a conclusion he had not foreseen.

Stepping mechanically to the door that opened on the passage of the house, he locked it, and, recrossing the parlour, moved irresolutely out into the shop, stationed himself behind the counter there and, from sheer force of habit and not conscious of what he was doing, commenced absently weighing up sugar into half-pound packages.

The shop was a very general grocer's, dowered with a spirit licence. It was small, and choked with a superabundant stock, stuffy with inharmonious odours, and inefficiently lighted.

Nat scooped the white crystals out of a bin with a little brass shovel, shaking them into the blue paper lying across the scale, or taking a few grains back from it, until the balance was struck to a nicety, deftly wrapping each package and tying it round with the automatic exactitude that comes of much experience.

All the while he was thinking; but his thoughts streamed through his mind, one after the other, in such an impetuous jostle that they merely seemed

to dazzle and confound him, so that every now and then he had to pull himself together to remember what he was thinking about.

The advent of a customer steadied him: a snuffling old woman carrying a wicker basket. She made some reference to the weather, and he replied. She ordered butter, and he beat up a diminutive pat on the marble slab; an egg, two bundles of wood, and a rasher of bacon. He had lifted down the piece of bacon she selected and was peering around for the knife before he recollected with a start where it was. He hacked the rasher off with a small chopper, the old woman chattering incessantly and he replying.

When she was gone he tried to recall what he had said to her, but comforted himself that he could not have said anything unusual, or she would not have departed so complacently.

If he had chanced to utter anything of what was in his mind, and she had walked to the glass panel of the parlour door and peered in between the curtains!— His eye following his grim fancy, he glided lightly in the same direction, and peered in between the curtains himself.

It lay there still, stark and immovable, as he had left it.

The sight of it touched him with no pity, no remorse, no sorrow at all, for at least the one thing he had dreaded more than any other could never happen now. This that had happened was bad, but to have lost her in the other way would have been infinitely worse; and only to feel sure that the worst was past filled him with an ineffable restfulness. He had for many months been a stranger to such perfect quietude of emotion as possessed him now. He marvelled dimly that he could be so callous, seeing how fiercely he had loved her; but the ache of the wound is not felt in the instant of its infliction—perhaps he might realise his loss to-morrow and then the grief of it would break his heart.

Meanwhile he was losing time, and every moment of delay was fraught with danger; and the more selfish fear prevailed. He had meant to die, but he was living, and in a flash the prospect of death for himself revolted him. He reached a resolution spontaneously, but, even in the full tide of his bewildering apprehensions, a subtle instinct restrained him and he saw it would be folly to omit a precaution, that might be the means of giving him several hours' start before discovery put the hounds of the law hot upon his scent.

He carried out the wooden shutters and barred them in their places with feverish haste; he had given his errand-boy half a day's holiday—he had done the same before but had each time postponed the event—and he employed no other assistant, so his course was unimpeded. He closed and bolted the shop door, flung off his apron, and put his hat and coat on and was turning the gas off when somebody without rattled at the door handle and sent his heart leaping and fluttering into his throat.

Surely it was impossible that any suspicion could have got abroad already?

"Fool!" he adjured himself, under his breath. "It's not that—it's—it's nobody."

Nevertheless, he stood very still, fearful lest any movement should betray his presence, while the hand rattled again at the door, and until the receding footsteps reassured him.

A minute later, he passed out by the side door of the house into the cool air of the living street, with a curious consciousness upon him of the change he had undergone. A quarter of an hour ago he had been a blameless, commonplace tradesman; he was commonplace no longer, nor blameless. There was blood on his hands; he was a criminal outcast, fleeing for his life.

II

No traveller that night in the railway carriage that conveyed Nat Peplow to Plymouth could have guessed from his appearance that he was a murderer, yet he shrank from every glance as if he knew the mark of Cain was visible upon his brow.

He was a slightly built man, under middle height, still on the right side of fifty; and far from being formidable his appearance was even a little grotesque. His hair and complexion were dark; he wore a scraggy untrimmed moustache and tufts of side whiskers, but kept his chin clean-shaven. His beaked nose was too large for his narrow visage, and his mouth was scarcely more than a puckered hole in his face—a face whose prevailing expression was of extreme simplicity and nervous meekness.

That Mrs. Peplow, who was less than half his age, had not married him for love might readily be believed; that such a man was not easily impelled to such a deed as he had done would go without saying.

As a matter of fact, Nat knew from the first that Alice Simm did not love him, and that she married him two years ago partly because he was in com-

paratively affluent circumstances, whilst she and her mother, lodging over his shop, were miserably poor; and partly because she had quarrelled with the man she had been engaged to—a flagrant instance of his perfidy having been brought to her knowledge by a sympathetic friend—and in the blind bitterness of her pique she was eager to do anything that would hurt him and seem to show that she was indifferent and, at the same time, flatter her outraged vanity with an appearance of revenge. Her mother, with a prospective eye to personal benefits, had championed Nat's cause throughout, and, prompted by her, he dashed into the arena at the psychological moment, and snatched a victory.

But——

"I might ha' known how it would end," Nat groaned within himself on that tedious night journey. "Damn him—and her too! I wish I had never met her!"

She had not grown to care for him, as he had hoped she would. She wearied of him; her passive disinclination hardened to dislike; her dislike into something approaching active detestation. From regretting the headlong course she had taken, Alice came to look back with an intolerable yearning

upon the love she had spurned in the heat of her resentment. Certainly that other man had wronged her; yet she felt she had far better have forgiven and forgotten and been happy.

The old lover returned, repentant and reproachful, and met her in this mood.

They met at first by accident; afterwards, and frequently, by design. And her love for this man was as a heathenish, sacrificial fire, and all her sense of duty and honour burnt like fuel in the flame of it.

For the greater part of three months such clandestine meetings had been happening, and there had already been serious talk between the two of going away together and starting life afresh in a new country, before any mutterings of the storm that was gathering broke upon the fatuous ears of Nat Peplow.

It was Mrs. Simm that warned him, still with a steadfast eye to her special interests, and, meek coward though he usually was, her warnings stung him into manhood, and he spoke sternly, resolutely to his wife of what he had heard. She paled and cast down her eyes, but did not condescend to utter a denial.

Thenceforward, they had known no peace. He

kept jealous watch on her goings out and comings in, but she was cunning in devising means to evade him. It came to pass that they never spoke to each other, save sullenly, or in angry bickerings, he assuming an attitude of accusation and injury, she of scornful defiance.

Once, in one of those wrangles, she laughed at him, as she had often done, and the sting of her fleering laughter exasperated him almost to madness. He stamped, and choked, and shook his puny fist excitedly.

"Curse you!" he raved. "You may laugh—but don't try me too far!"

She laughed again, tickled by a something grotesque in the portentous earnestness of the plain-featured, oddly fashioned little man who menaced her so loudly.

"I tell you—and I mean it," he shouted hoarsely "sooner than you shall go with that blackguard—sooner than you shall go away with him—I—I'll kill you—I'll kill you—damn you, I'll kill you!"

The words took him by surprise and inspired him. Tossing about sleepless that night he took the knife, in his dreams, for the first time, and, in imagination, struck her to the heart with it exultantly, and saw her lying at his feet as, at last and

in very truth, he had seen her lying—was it only an hour since? He had lost all count of time.

III

Nat fled no farther than Plymouth, for at least two reasons. His life had run so long in the one, narrow, homely groove that the near prospect of a sea voyage and a transplanting of himself to some distant, unknown land was only less appalling than death itself. Furthermore, in his haste, he had not thought to furnish himself with extra money and had come away with a trifle under six pounds in his pocket.

For an eternal four days he dubitated at Plymouth, living in an obscure hotel, and venturing little into the streets before nightfall. He dared not take up a newspaper, knowing too well what he would read there. By day, when he was not at meals, he prowled moodily about the billiard table, eager to play with anybody who would join him; of nights he lay awake, or dozed by fits, raving through that last fatal quarrel and striking that savage blow with the knife again. Every step in the street, every step on the stairs was in pursuit of him, and he quaked and held his breath till it

was past. A dozen times in those four nights he had leaped from his bed, and crouched, listening in the dark to imaginary whisperings in the empty passage without.

On the fifth day he could sustain the awful strain no longer. He was completely broken down and despondently reckless, a hunted haggard object that went in terror of its own shadow. He regretted nothing, and no remorse fretted him; it was the constant monotony of suspense that was wasting him, body and soul. And he was seized with a sudden irresistible impulse to go back and end his misery; a great craving for rest cast all fear out of him.

Darkness had fallen when he arrived in London again; and his own street, muddy from recent rains, and reflecting the light of lamps and shop windows in all its puddles, greeted him with homely friendly looks. His shop was still shut. He opened the side door quietly with his latch-key, and entered unmolested.

The place wore a cold air of desolation. Otherwise both the shop and the parlour retained their well-remembered aspect. The body had been removed, and, on investigation, he ascertained that the till had been emptied and his cash-box was

gone from the cupboard. Doubtless the police had taken charge of these things, he reflected, when they took away the body.

The dark stain on the hearthrug was not so large as he had been picturing it to himself; still, it was there, and had a strange fascination for him. It was the first thing to catch his eye as he went in, and the last as he came out.

He came out with no undue delay, before his resolution could waver, and before he was discovered and had to endure the humiliation of arrest. A brisk five minutes' walking brought him to the police station, and he mounted the steps unhesitatingly.

"My name," he said darkly to the officer in charge, "is Nathaniel Peplow."

The officer betrayed no excitement.

"I wish to give myself up for the murder of my wife last Friday."

The officer's interest was aroused. He opened a book, tested a pen on his thumb-nail, and called an attendant constable to come inside and shut the outer door.

Nat spent that night in a police cell, but his mind was at ease and he slept soundly.

In the morning he was taken before the magis-

trate, and his confession was read out in court. Then followed a surprise.

A policeman appeared in the witness box, and discoursed with the automatic glibness of his tribe.

"I made enquiries at the prisoner's house, yer worshup, and, from information received, his wife is still alive. He assaulted her with a knife on the date he mentions, an' absconded, leaving her for dead. But he'd only inflicted a flesh wound on the left side."

"Where is the woman?" queried the magistrate. "Is she going to prosecute?"

"She sailed for Australia yesterday, yer worshup."

"For Australia?"

"Her mother, who lodges at the prisoner's house, says there was trouble over another man, and the prisoner was mad with jealousy and tried to kill his wife. She took advantage of the prisoner's absence an' went off with that man yesterday."

"Have you proof of this?"

"I have been to the steamship company's office an' seen their names in the passenger list."

"Is the mother in court?"

"She is, yer worshup."

"Let her go into the box."

Mrs. Simm's tearful corroborations were interrupted by a startling, heavy thud; the prisoner had collapsed in the dock.

"The relief of learning he has not been guilty of this terrible crime has been too much for him," suggested the magistrate. "I shall discharge you," he announced, when Nat had been brought to. "You have still a great misfortune to bear, it is true, but it is not so great as you had anticipated."

That was the magistrate's view. Nat, who saw the trouble more closely, felt that the doom he had escaped was far more desirable than the doom that had overtaken him. To think that, after all, he had bungled like a fool! If he had but stopped and seen that his aim had erred and struck again! But he had been a coward; the sight of blood had scared him, and he had taken a woman's swoon for death.

And so she was gone—gone with him—with the man for whose eternal damnation he would thankfully have bartered his own soul. In a passion of delirium he had his hands at the blackguard's throat and wrung the life out of him.

How he found his way home he could not have told. He hardly knew he was there until it casu-

ally occurred to him that he was pacing to and fro betwixt the shop and the parlour like a caged animal. He must have been there then for some hours, for morning and afternoon were past, and the twilight was darkening. Having lit the gas, he resumed his restless tramping up and down, now plunged deep in black musings, now seething into a frothy bubble of threats and curses and impotent denunciations. All he had striven to prevent had happened in spite of him. Oh, that he had died and never known—or could die and forget!

He had eaten nothing all day, and was not hungry, but was parched with thirst. In a calmer, lucid interval his glance travelled round the dismal shop and lighted haphazard on a particular shelf. Why had he not caught at this notion sooner? There was more than one way of forgetting. He chuckled, and reaching down a bottle of brandy carried it into the parlour.

Mrs. Simm had returned home hours before this, but, having overheard him from the passage, she deemed it prudent to retire to her own room and not intrude upon him until he had simmered down and was in a fit condition to be consoled and advised.

She could hear him moving about, her room

being immediately over the parlour, but he made no noise that disturbed her till just after she had gone to bed; then she was startled out of a doze by hearing him laugh—a grating, deliberate, mirthless laugh that rose to a strident roar, and ceased abruptly. She sat up to listen, with icy little thrills tingling through her veins.

The savage outburst was not repeated, however, so she quieted her nerves and lay down again.

It might have been an hour later when she was aroused by a sound of hammering; and she was trying to brace herself to the task of going out and calling over the staircase to him, when to her intense relief the noise suddenly stopped.

Then minutes afterward there was a sharp crash, as if he had petulantly kicked a chair over—then a deep stillness, and though she lay awake a weary while no other sound alarmed her that night.

Next morning, not hearing him astir, she assumed he had gone to bed late, and went downstairs thinking to propitiate him by getting his breakfast ready.

She pushed open the parlour door, but some obstruction behind kept it from opening more than a few inches. Peering round with difficulty, she perceived it was the chair he had kicked over last

night. Even then it did not occur to her that he could not have gone up to bed. She thrust in a little farther and leaned forward to push the chair aside, but before her hand touched it she tore herself back with a piercing cry, and ran out shrieking into the street, clasping her hands over her eyes.

But she had seen it, and could not shut out the sight of it; it was there behind the door—a grimly fantastic shape—a dark, horrible something that dangled against the wall at the end of a rope.

A BLOOMING PLANT

"ORL a-blowin' and a-growin'!"

Enry caught sight of a lady at a window, and stopped short in his melancholy chaunt. He stepped into her front garden with an armful of flowers in pots and one in his hand, and offered them all for inspection.

"'Ere yer are, lidy," he called huskily. "Loverley geranium—look at the colour!—Chiner arster, be-autiful lily o' the valley. Orl a-blowin' and a-growin', lidy."

The lady shook her head.

"Any price yer like, lidy." Enry pleaded. "Loverley toolip. You'll never 'ave a chance to buy a better one. 'Ere yer are, lidy, gimme a old pair of boots for it!"

She shook her head again, but as Enry persevered she obviously weakened, and presently withdrew from the window and, after an interval of uncertainty, appeared at the door. Enry was halfway up the steps in a moment and, with a deft

sweep of his arms, ranged his flower-pots on the top one.

"Take yer choice, lidy," he entreated her. "Can't do no business at all to-day. 'Ave one for luck, lidy, an' gimme what yer like for it."

"Are you the man who sold me a Christmas Rose two years ago?" she asked sharply.

She was a young lady, not experienced enough to dissemble.

"No, lidy. Not me, lidy. I wouldn't do such a thing," Enry assured her, taking warning from her tone and manner. "Fust time I ever bin in this neighbourhood."

"Oh, I thought you looked rather like him," she said apologetically.

"If I do, lidy, I can't 'elp it. My usual luck," Enry protested. "I don't do it a-purpose."

"Oh, it's my mistake," she admitted graciously. "He told me it was a Christmas Rose and would bloom beautifully, but I have had it two Christmases and there has never been a bud on it yet."

"Ah, I wasn't him. That's the sort o' greaser," Enry sighed and looked depressed, "what spoils the trade for honest men. Sorry you think I look like 'im, lidy——"

"I thought so just at first," she interrupted uncomfortably. "I was only wondering—it doesn't matter. My mistake."

"Thank you, lidy." Enry was grateful. "I'm not that sort. I never sell no plant I can't guarantee, and, if it don't give complete satisfaction, you can 'ave yer money back, or I'll change it for another. I can't say no fairer than that, can I, lidy? If you was wantin' any toolips, amenomies, crisanthelums——"

"No, thank you, I really have no room for any more," she declared. "A friend of mine has a really beautiful Christmas Rose, and I thought I would like one, too—a real blooming plant. Now if you had one that you could recommend—But there is nothing else I want just at present."

"Well, lidy, to tell the truth, I 'ave got a Christmas Rose—an uncommon beauty." Enry hesitated. "But, the fact is, I was takin' it to a lidy who specially arst me to get one for 'er. Still—I didn't say I'd take it to-day; she won't be expectin' it so soon; and, if you wanted it p'tickler, why, I daresay I could get 'er another an' take it next time I come round."

"It is a genuine blooming plant?"

"Oh, lidy, I wouldn't say so if it wasn't. It's

the best bloomin' plant you could expect to get anywhere."

Enry was emphatic about it. He ran lightly out to his barrow while he was speaking, and called in a brisk, businesslike style to his waiting, moody assistant:

"Where's that Christmas Rose I was a-keepin' for that lidy, Walter? Ah, here it is—here we are!"

He snatched up a small indefinite-looking plant half lost in a large pot and ran back with it.

"Now, look at that! That's what you want, lidy. A beauty!" he cried, eyeing it admiringly. "There's something like a Christmas Rose for yer. One I can guarantee meself, lidy."

"Isn't it rather small?" she inspected it dubiously. "It is not like the other one I have."

"Well, you don't want another one like that, lidy. You wouldn't never 'ave no bloom on it if it was," he said conclusively. "This is a real Christmas Rose. I dunno what you've got, lidy, but this is a real young one, a cuttin' from a prize Christmas Rose that's flowered every year for six years and is still a-blowin' and a-growin' as 'arty as ever. Look at it. Take it in yer own 'ands. You know somethin' about flowers, I can see that, and you only got to cast yer eye on that to see what it is.

Please yerself, lidy. If it ain't quite what you want, I can take it on to the lidy I was bringin' it for an' no 'arm done and everybody satisfied."

"How much do you want for it?"

"Well, they run into money, the real bloomers do." He regarded it critically. "Say two shillin's an' a pair of old boots, lidy, an' one of the gent's old coats, an' it's a bargain."

She hesitated; then went in, and returned, after a few minutes, with a pair of exhausted boots and a seedy pair of trousers.

"I couldn't get nothin' for these, lidy—they're a bit far gorn." Enry examined them with undisguised disappointment. "I should lose on 'em. Throw me in another pair o' trousers and a old hat, or else I'll chance it an' take these an' 'arf a crown an' call it a deal."

She demurred, but Enry laid stress on the circumstance that it was a guaranteed Christmas Rose and if she missed the opportunity she would be sorry for it, so she ultimately offered to let him have the barren plant she had purchased two years ago, to see if he could do anything with it, and to add a pair of second-hand shoes of her own, and with these and the other articles and two shillings Enry reluctantly undertook to be contented.

"You see the leaves on this one of mine," she remarked, as she passed the spurious Rose out to him, "are quite different from the leaves on yours."

"Course they are, lidy," Enry spoke with a touch of scorn, "you only got to look at this old one of yours to see it ain't no Christmas Rose. It don't look no good to me. You got the best o' this bargain, lidy, no error! Still, if it starts my luck I shan't grumble. Plenty o' water is what Christmas Roses want, lidy, don't forgit that, and keep it in a cool place, an' thank you kindly, and good day, lidy."

"That wasn't no Christmas Rose you sold 'er, Enry," observed the moody Walter, when they were round the corner with the barrow and near enough to each other for easy conversation. "That was that bit o' privet you stuck in without no root."

"It's my idea of a Christmas Rose, Walter," said Enry, with some severity, "and, if I like to call it that, why shouldn't I? Come on! Throw it orf yer chest—Orl a-blowin' and a-growin'!"

And the wheezy voice of Walter blended with his in the chorus.

Turning another corner they came in sight of a railway station. Several passengers were coming

out, evidently city men on the way home, and, following his usual custom, Enry devoted marked attention to the more affluent and likely looking among them as they passed.

"'Ere you are, guvner." He addressed himself persuasively to a genteel young clerk of guileless aspect, and turned and walked beside him. "'Ave a nice geranium, or a stirshun to take 'ome to the missis. Orl a-blowin' and a-growin'! 'Ave a nice dailier, sir. Or can I do yer a sweet bigonier, or a Christmas Rose, or——"

"A Christmas Rose?" The young gentleman pulled up. "Have you got a Christmas Rose? Will it bloom? Are you sure?"

He questioned Enry closely and seemed greatly tempted. The truth was, he had been lingering in town with a friend and was nearly two hours late, and caught at the thought of carrying a peace-offering home with him.

"My wife bought one of a man two years ago," he explained frankly, "and it has been a great disappointment to her. It has never bloomed. Now if you are quite certain this is a good one and will flower next Christmas——"

Enry was hurt that there should be any doubt of that. He had cultivated it himself, he said;

it had grown up under his own eye; he knew its pedigree and was prepared to pledge his solemn oath that by the time Christmas came it would be simply a mass of bloom; he urged the young man to feel the leaves and smell it and see for himself, and though there might not be much smell now there would be more later on—not much, because it isn't to be expected from this sort of plant—but he could judge for his own self. Whilst he was talking he had lured the young man along to the barrow, then, standing his armful of pots on the pavement, he snatched up the Christmas Rose the lady had given him in exchange and submitted it for admiration.

"Be-autiful plant, sir," he exclaimed ecstatically, "I was takin' it to a party what arst me to get 'er one, but I'm always open to do business, and I'll try to get 'er another. If you want a Christmas Rose, a champion bloomer, now's yer chance, guvner, and 'ere it is."

"Very like the one we've got at home," the young man admitted. "The right kind—I can see that—but will it——"

"Of course it will," Enry struck in. "Same breed, as you say, sir. All Christmas Roses has that kind of leaves. Bound to. But the good ones

bloom, and the inferior ones don't. Now, this is a good one."

The young gentleman debated inwardly with himself and outwardly with Enry; considered five shillings too much, but finally paid three-and-six and went on his way bearing the Christmas Rose carefully in his arms.

"Git a move on yer," said Enry, stepping smartly beside the barrow. "When she sees it she'll send him back to look for us."

"She said she wanted a bloomin' plant," Walter panted with the haste he was making and chuckling ghoulishly, "and she's got it."

"She's got it, Walter," Enry corrected him, "all except the bloom!"

DON JUAN OF HAGGERSTON

I

In the beginning, everybody who knew them was surprised that Gus Parry should condescend to be fascinated by Bella Ward; in the end, everybody was surprised that Bella should be more or less contented with Gus Parry.

It began when Gus, strolling down Somerset Street eating fried fish out of a scrap of newspaper, saw Bella sewing at her mother's door.

They were neighbours, and knew each other by sight, but moved in different circles: Bella was incurably homely, and Gus something of a distinguished figure in local society.

"Hallo!" he ejaculated, delaying to look at her; and it struck him then, for the first time, that she was a bit of a daisy—not smart, perhaps, but pretty enough in a shy and simple way.

She glanced up and blushed and nodded with a timid smile.

"'Ave some?" he urged, coming a step nearer and proffering the contents of the newspaper.

She shook her head, blushed again, sensible of the compliment, but declined.

"Where yer goin' to-night?" he enquired. "I'm goin' to the Cinema. Come wiv us?"

"I dunno." Bella affected indifference, as if the Cinema had no attractions for her, but she was flattered, and a little afraid her apparent lack of enthusiasm might wound his susceptibilities, so added quickly, "Might manage it—if yer like."

His attentions did not stop there, and before long Haggerston was talking about them, and wondering.

For they had almost nothing in common; some sober, plodding artisan might have seen in her an ideal housemate and loyal mother of children; but Gus was a man about town, within his limits, a sort of Don Juan with the gilt off, and what he could see in her nobody could imagine.

He was handsome, in a crude fashion, with roving eyes and a loose mouth and, after working-hours especially, showed an elegant, though loud, taste in the cut and pattern of his garments; while Bella's prettiness was of the very quietest type;

she was awkwardly bashful; her hat and dress were unsensational and tame even of a Sunday. She had never walked out with anyone before, and Gus had a vivid reputation for gallantry, and was credited with the breaking of many hearts. He usually had money to spend, for he supplemented his modest salary as bottler at a mineral water factory by a talent for backing winners and a lucky hand at Put-and-Take, and other speculations among outside brokers; but it was as much as Bella and her mother could do to live from hand to mouth by everlastingly drudging at tailoring work in their one stuffy ground-floor room in the poorer section of Somerset Street.

Somerset Street was a narrow cut between high houses that were old and squalid. A barren paving stretched up its dreary quarter of a mile, and it was shut off from the main road, at its Haggerston end, by a massive wrought-iron gateway which was rusted with age and broken and had lost one of its gates. This gate-way gave a forlornly aristocratic touch to it which the street itself did not live up to, since, as there was no road through for vehicles, it was not only converted into a safe playground for children, but, above a certain height, was thickly intersected by clothes-lines

from some or other of which drying clothes fluttered daily.

The better society of the street was to be found at the gate end, where Gus Parry resided with his people. Bella and her mother lodged at the other end, where there were more tenants to the square inch and, consequently, more clothes lines.

When the general astonishment at Gus's latest vagary had subsided, people laughed and told one another it was only a passing fancy and they hoped the girl might have the sense to know he was merely amusing himself and come to no harm before it was over. That he would tire of Bella even sooner than he had tired of more dashing charmers was a foregone conclusion.

But the strange thing was that, keeping a level head and prudently restraining his rebellious ardours within seemly bounds, Bella seemed to take a real hold upon his unstable heart, and by degrees, without seeming to be even aware of it, obtained a quite remarkable ascendancy over him. Whether it was her complete unlikeness to other girls of his acquaintance, her novel simplicity, her unsophisticated reticence and gentleness that drew and subdued him, it was a fact that evening after evening

he sauntered to her door and leaned there chatting with her as she sat sewing, for the sake of the fresher air, just inside the passage of the house; or if it had grown too dark and she had gone in, he would put his head into their front room, with any transparent excuse, and start a casual conversation with her and her mother.

He walked out with Bella from time to time; that was undeniable. A rumour even obtained that he had been seen in an early twilight accompanying her to the shop that employed her and her mother and had carried her bulky parcel of work part of the way for her; but nobody altogether credited the latter assertion until he was positively known to have done something as extraordinary, and more significant, one Saturday in May. And after that everybody was prepared to believe anything.

On that Saturday afternoon he took Bella to a second-hand shop in the Kingsland Road and there purchased a frying-pan nearly as good as new and a stuffed owl under a glass shade and left these articles for storage at Bella's lodging. Her mother confessed all she knew to a neighbour who had witnessed their arrival with the goods, and the bearings of the event were sufficiently obvious. It

was their first step towards acquiring a home of their own.

Bella was happy in those days, and happiness brought a new light into her eyes, a new alertness into her manner; it touched her pale, pleasant features with the beauty that clothes ordinary things when the sun shines on them. People thought she was lucky; she thought so herself; she was envied; she was hated, and so made to feel that she was privileged among her kind.

Nevertheless, there were pessimists who wagged their heads and said darkly:

"Nothin' in it. You wait! He'll chuck 'er presently when 'e's had enough of her. You see."

And after certain weeks those who waited saw Gus in amorous attendance upon Alice Bates, the breezy, garish belle of Appleby's Row, hard by.

Bella may have seen nothing of this, but she was duly informed of it, and forfeited the sympathy that would otherwise have been bestowed upon her by the coldness with which she received such tidings and the brevity of her responses. Whatever she may have suffered, she never talked of it, and if Gus thought to rouse her jealousy and force her to pay him the compliment of going after him he was

disappointed. She toiled hard at her tailoring, trudging through the streets every other day with her big parcel of work, as usual, but her face grew thinner, her eyes lost their light, and the bloom faded from her cheeks.

So the days passed, and still Gus remained aloof, and still she neither wrote to him nor made attempts to waylay him covertly, as others he jilted had used to; on the contrary, an instinctive pride or sense of personal dignity led her to keep out of his way, and it is probable that this unwonted treatment rankled in Gus and piqued and irritated him.

Anyhow, it came about that one evening as she sat sewing in the door-way a shadow fell across her, and she knew without looking up that he was there again.

"Cheer-o, Bella!" said he. "Comin' out?"

His manner was shamefaced and discomforted.

If she was embarrassed she did not show it, but shook her head and would not trust herself to speak.

"Why not?"

But she went on sewing in silence.

"All right, yer needn't make yerself so narsty with a bloke," he protested. "I was only larkin'.

No 'arm done, is there? Look 'ere. 'Ows' that?"

He tossed a silver bangle into her lap.

She did not take it up at once, but the hardness of her heart began to melt; she was conscious of relenting impulses; he was penitent, and it was not in her to be inexorable. He went on mumbling intermittent apologies, till it troubled her to see such a man so abased, and when for a second time he pleaded:

"Bella! Cawn't yer drop stitchin' that beastly stuff an' come an' do a walk rhand?"—she was impelled, after a momentary hesitation, to smile a forgiving "Yes," and, slipping the bangle over her wrist, went in for her hat.

That same evening, by way of clinching their reconciliation, he bought a cream-jug with a picture on it and a set of pie dishes and entrusted these objects to Bella for storage with the frying-pan and the stuffed owl, thus demonstrating the seriousness of his intentions and putting the seal on their engagement.

Thereafter, the jaded look passed from Bella's face, and she could sing over her sewing again and happily invest Gus with more ideal virtues than he had ever aspired to possess. There were flaws in

his character; she could not but recognise that. The police had recognised it once or twice, but this did not seriously injure his social standing in Somerset Street, and his predilection for backing winners, seeing that they frequently *were* winners, was even accounted to him for righteousness. His fickleness was his gravest fault in Bella's eyes, and for that there were excuses: he was more run after and therefore had to resist more feminine temptations than most men, and in her humility she felt that she was herself lacking in the dash and brilliance and allurement he had a right to expect in anyone who hoped to monopolise him. She must make allowance for his deficiencies, especially in view of her own, and was buoyed by a secret confidence that marriage would steady him, reclaim him, and put an end to his wandering inclinations.

Nevertheless, it came upon her with a shock of surprise when, after a month or so of revived faithfulness, he relapsed again and was rumoured to be the improper slave of another beauty in another street, and gave Bella the go-by as before.

As before, she veiled from the public eye whatever she may have suffered, and shrank from seeming to pursue him. But though she could not dust the stuffed owl and those other household articles,

or so much as glance from her work at the shelf on which they were enshrined, without a pang, she could not bring herself to return them to him and thus, as it were, renounce him and close their romance definitely once for all.

The dreary weeks dragged by, then one evening as she passed into the street, coming back from the city with her burdensome parcel of tailoring, she saw him lounging with boon companions at the corner. She trembled, and her face blanched, but she hurried on. Just as she passed, one of his cronies laughed and called to her in ribald mockery. The words stung her like a lash, but they were scarcely uttered when a curious sound of scuffling arose, a muffled roar of rage went up, and turning quickly she saw the man who had laughed sprawling on the pavement and Gus rampant above him.

She cried that night in bed, yet it was more from pleasure than sorrow. And when Gus lounged up the following evening she received him without agitation. Somehow, she had expected him.

"I give 'Arry Simpson what for larst night," he remarked carelessly. "'E won't try to be so clever agen in a 'urry, I bet!"

She did not reply immediately; but, the

remembrance of his gallantry leaving her no alternative, she said:

"Yes, I saw you."

"'E's got too much sauce, 'Arry has. Wants a little of it taken out of him, and I done it for him a treat. We had a fair scrap arter you'd gone, and Joe and Phil Morris had to take him 'ome when I'd finished because he couldn't see 'is way." He bragged in this strain for a minute, then switched off suddenly: "I say, chuck this job, can't yer? What's the matter with a toddle rhand?"

Bella reflected.

"Rippin' piece on at the Standard—'Worst Woman in London'—let's go there. Eh?"

That night they witnessed the play together from the front of the gallery, going in by the early door; and Somerset Street marvelled more than ever, and did not know what to make of it. Either Gus was a bit of a fool or Bella was uncommonly artful, they argued; anyhow, it was clear she had acquired such influence over him that, though he might desert her on an impulse, he could not shake himself free and was, sooner or later, drawn back to her as by some inexplicable law of nature.

He did, indeed, fall from grace yet again within a month, and this time went near to losing her

altogether. He developed a sudden infatuation for the young lady who happened to be pledged to his own particular chum, 'Erb Mowler, a morose young man who, before he arrived at years of greater discretion, had enjoyed distinction as a swaggering hooligan, a bandit who snatched coppers from terrified children going on errands, had attempted garrotting in a small way, and once shot a policeman through the helmet but had been acquitted for want of evidence, because the revolver could not be traced to him.

Not a man to be lightly trifled with; nor one, perhaps, to be much pitied if the rôle of the injured innocent was imposed upon him, but when he came, smarting under a sense of his wrongs, and glowered in at Bella from the doorway, her ready sympathy went out to him, as to a fellow victim.

"'Ere," he rumbled; "I s'pose you know abart it?"

Bella admitted sadly that she did.

"Yus. Well," he continued, "'e bleedin' well ain't goin' to fool me. Nor she ain't neether, blast 'er!"

Bella glanced at him enquiringly.

"Reckon you won't be sorry to git yer own back on him, eh?" said 'Erb. "Well, you leave it to

me. I'll give 'im more than enough for both of us, I know where to drop on 'em both to-night, and I'm goin' to let him 'ave a taste of this. There'll be plenty left over for 'er as well——"

Bella interrupted. Without warning, she sprang on him desperately and clutched his hand.

"Give it to me!" she panted, striving to wrest the weapon from him. "Come on, d'you hear? Give it to me!"

"Don't you be so damn silly," he returned, easily resisting her "You leave go. Cheese it! You'll 'ave it go off and kill yerself if you ain't careful. Le' go, I tell yer!"

In the struggle he had clasped her hand, and was aware that it was a very small hand and of a pleasant neatness, for all its work-hardened fingers. He was a little fluttered by her flushed face being so near him, and realised that it was pretty in a quiet kind of way and had more charm than he had noticed in it hitherto.

"Give it to me," she insisted. "You shall not go till you do."

"Now, stow it. Don't let's have no bloomin' accidents," he pleaded. "It's loaded. Le' go, and I promise I won't do it. Take my oath I won't—not to-night."

"You promise? You swear you won't?"

"Swear to Gord I won't. There you are! Honest!"

She doubtfully released her hold, and he slipped the revolver back into his pocket; but he did not let her hand go. She had to jerk it away from him.

He made no attempt to recover it, but lingered, chatting moodily, and she encouraged him to stay, for as long as she had him under her eye she knew he could be doing no mischief.

"I wouldn't take 'er on agen now—not if she was to go down on 'er knees to me," he said at parting. "And I guess you wouldn't 'ave *'im* now, not at any price, would yer?"

Bella evaded answering. She had said very little all the while; but when he moved to go she roused herself to remind him of his promise.

"That's all right," he returned. "I won't do nothing to-night. I dunno abart to-morrow. But I'll come rhand and see you afore I make up my mind—I promise you that much; so you needn't worry yerself. So long!"

He called three evenings in succession, and as his yearning for vengeance dwindled his bearing towards Bella became more tender, more intimate,

more insinuating. But, when he offered to treat her to a seat in the pit at the Pav., she professed to be too busy to think of such diversions.

This irritated him.

"Oh! It's no good then, ain't it?" She knew what he meant, but made no sign. "I'm as good as 'im, ain't I? . . . I s'pose you'd take that ruddy bounder on agen, as before, if 'e was to come back, would yer? Well," as she maintained a discreet silence, "we'll see! Let me find him hangin' around here agen, that's all! I ain't made no promise abart that, and 'e isn't goin' to have it all 'is own way, not if I know it! 'Ave some sense. Come on! I can give yer a good time, and I shan't serve yer like he did."

But she was not to be persuaded, and he went off at last, simmering with vexation.

Now his visits to Bella had been so marked as to give rise to considerable gossip, rumours of which must have reached Gus in his wary comings and goings, for he presented himself to Bella unexpectedly, and sulkily and sneeringly taunted her with having chucked him for such a contemptible outsider as 'Erb Mowler.

"Don't know what you mean," she said shortly.

"Oh, yus you do," he cried. "If I ain't good

enough and you want to hook on to him, say so."

"Where have you been all this time?" she enquired.

"Me? I've bin too busy on a special job," he declared, "but I've heard about you and 'im, and I want to know if it's true, that's all."

She gazed at him reproachfully.

"If it's all lies, say so," he urged; and added, magnanimously, "I don't believe all I hear. Put yer hat on and come out and let's talk about it."

But she was not prepared to surrender all at once.

"Not to-night," she said. "I haven't time."

"Right O! Please yerself. Don't matter to me," he bridled resentfully. "I'm off. . . . Oh, then, what abart them things I bought for us?"

A feeling of despair almost swept away her self-possession, for she knew that this meant the end; but she knew also that it would be unwise to relent too readily.

"I'll send 'em back to you to-morrow," she retorted, choking with emotion, "if you like."

"Well, you'd better, then," said he, "and I dessay I can find somebody else who'll be glad to have 'em."

With that, he swung off in a huff, and Bella retired indoors and wept over the owl and his other gifts and wrapped them up carefully and contemplated returning them, but was not destined to do so.

There had been a furtive, fevered witness of their interview that evening. He watched from a distance and doggedly shadowed Gus out into the Kingsland Road, when he departed.

Before morning Somerset Street had learned that 'Erb Mowler was lying in a police cell, and Gus, with an ugly bullet wound in his face, in hospital; where Bella was among the earliest of his visitors. Most of his countenance was hidden in bandages, and at the sight of her by his bedside he began to whimper.

"Nice thing you've bin an' done for me now!" he said. "If you hadn't taken up with 'im, the blighter! this wouldn't 'ave happened. Marked for life I am, and all your doings."

"Don't, Gus," she said soothingly. "You know I didn't——"

"Oh, no!" he interrupted. "It was all me. That's right. Lay it to me!"

"I wasn't blaming you, Gus."

"I should think not! You know jolly well——"

But the nurse interposed. She could not allow the patient to be excited, and Bella tearfully withdrew.

She could not find courage to visit the hospital again. News filtered to her, from time to time, that he was progressing favourably, and at length she heard he was better, and that he was coming out.

He had not been home many hours before he made his way to Bella's door, and found her sewing industriously in her accustomed place.

"Gus!" she ejaculated, in a flutter. "Are you —are you better?"

"Middlin'," he growled. The left side of his face was streaked with a wide strip of plaster, and he was subdued and sullen and unhappy. "I shall never be fit to be seen no more, though."

"Oh, Gus—I'm so sorry!"

And her eyes filled with tears.

"Fat lot o' good that's goin' to do me!" he laughed mirthlessly. "But it's done, and there it is. I don't want to have no more row abart it. You—you ain't sent them things back? . . . Well, you needn't, if you don't want to."

His magnanimity completely broke her down. She suspected she had been wrong in entertaining

any pity for 'Erb Mowler and that her involuntary association with him had, after all, been a sort of disloyalty to Gus.

"As for yer precious 'Erb," Gus added bitterly, "he's got twelve months and ought to have had twelve years, and he'd better keep out o' my road when they lets him loose, that's all!" He paused to give her an opportunity of speaking, and, as she did not take it, concluded, "He'll deserve all he gits."

"Yes," she agreed humbly.

"I reckon! Well, it's no use 'avin' no more jaw about 'im. It's done now, an' we may as well let it be done with." He regarded her thoughtfully. "I'm right enough now, an' shall be goin' back to work next week." His manner softened; he was assuming a mollified tone. "But I'm sick of all this foolin' around. Time I got settled down. I ain't got enough for no weddin'—not for two or three weeks. But we may as well go an' put the banns up at the Register, if you like, while I've got time. I'm game if you are—eh? Comin'?"

II

Although Gus Parry dressed startlingly well of Sundays and was something of a leader of fashion

in those Haggerston circles he favoured with his acquaintance, he was not a man of substance; as a matter of fact, when he married Bella his savings were so inconsiderable that the wedding expenses entirely absorbed them.

This, however, was a negligible detail, as, with admirable forethought, he had arranged that he and his wife should reside with his mother-in-law in the full use and enjoyment of her furniture until they were enabled to acquire a little of their own.

So far from demurring to this prudent scheme Mrs. Ward was disposed to encourage it, for several reasons.

She and Bella had been earning a joint livelihood by hard work for some time past, and she shrank from the prospect of losing Bella's assistance and companionship and being left to maintain herself in solitude.

Moreover, though Gus's people lived like herself in Somerset Street, they lived, as I have intimated, at the better end of it. Gus naturally prided himself on this, no less than on his local reputation for gallantry, and on his enterprise in systematically "putting a bit on" in racing seasons and intermittently "pulling something off"; and Mrs.

Ward fully recognised these distinctions. She was as conscious as he was that he stooped a little in marrying Bella, and it gratified her, no doubt to reflect that henceforth she might hope to bask in the gracious light that shines upon the humble connections of persons who are not so humble.

And at the back of these considerations was another and more practical hope. Mrs. Ward had a dim fancy that in accommodating Gus and his bride she was, in a manner, making provision against her old age. If Gus found himself sufficiently comfortable and she could secure his confidence and regard, he would probably be contented to let these preliminary arrangements settle into permanency, and when she was past work he would not grudge her a seat at his table and a corner by the fireside she had cheerfully shared with him at first.

Consoled with these visions, she made no grievance of her partial banishment from the ground floor bed-sitting-room to a dark back bedroom retained for her accommodation by night and rather bleakly furnished with one chair, a makeshift bed on the floor, and a draped packing case that served as a dressing-table. Really, she felt, this was no hardship if it helped her toward

the end she had in view, for she still had unrestricted use of the front room during the day, when she and Bella sat and sewed there as usual while Gus was away at his work.

For two or three weeks, perhaps a little longer, these amicable domestic adjustments worked smoothly enough; then Gus began to chafe under them. He grew tired of coming home every evening from his bottling achievements at the mineral-water factory to take tea tamely with his wife and mother-in-law; he grew also slightly ashamed of it.

His own family observed with compassionate surprise the change that had come over him; from the first they had scornfully opposed his marriage, and would not be persuaded that Bella and her mother had not cunningly entrapped him; they had, in consequence, declined to visit or be visited by his wife and were fiercely jealous of her influence over him. Their contemptuous compassion exasperated and humiliated Gus; and he was still more humiliated by the open ridicule of that particular set of friends who had aforetime looked up to him as to a master spirit.

"What ho, Gus! Where yer bin? Never see nothin' of you now at the 'Swan,'" one of them

would shout, as he passed a group lounging at the corner, when he was on his way home. "What's up?"

"Missis keeps him indoors," explained another, "to turn the mangle."

"Is she goin' to make yer darn the stockin's to-night, Gus?"

"No; he's got the washin' to do. Want any body to come an' hang 'em out for yer, Gus?"

Their fleering laughter followed him. He shouted and laughed back with an unsuccessful affectation of indifference, but a dull resentment burned in him, and he was hot with shame.

His resentment was not against them, but against Bella.

She was certainly pretty in a quiet, indefinable way, and had a frank, winning childlike manner that appealed to him in his bachelor days, but he was beginning to wonder, now that he was become more familiar with her charm, how it was he had ever allowed himself to be so bewitched and subdued by it as to go the length of fettering himself to her for life. In his heart he must have known that Bella had always been reticent, timorous, shy, even a little afraid of him, yet he soon and easily brought himself to think with his family that she

and her mother, ambitious of so desirable an alliance, had deliberately snared him. They had made a fool of him and everybody knew it; he knew it also now. His resentment battened on the thought till he was obsessed by a morose sense of humiliation, and, finding it unendurable, proceeded to vindicate himself in the eyes of those whose respect he had forfeited by an emphatic assertion of his lapsed supremacy.

He discontinued going home regularly for tea. When he did go, he went out again immediately after with an off-hand:

"No good me stickin' indoors with all this sewin' messin' the place up. I may be a bit late, so you needn't sit up for me."

They used to sit up for him, nevertheless, and, whilst he wallowed luxuriously with his cronies in the beer of the "White Swan," Bella and her mother were dutifully sewing until their eyes and their fingers ached and it was as much as they could do not to fall asleep over the work that kept the household going and left most of Gus's earnings in the margin he required for his own comfort.

Gus strongly disapproved of these late sittings, believing they were obstinately maintained as a tacit reproach to himself, and he testified his dis-

approval sometimes with plain and coloured words, sometimes with lowering looks and a menacing silence that were worse, sometimes by forcibly sweeping all the sewing from the table to the floor and truculently refusing to allow Mrs. Ward to stop and pick it up, always with a sufficient effectiveness to drive his tactful mother-in-law to eliminate herself instantly and retreat in fear and trembling to her own bedroom.

Generally he was incoherent and obviously more or less feverish from his evening devotions; but there came a night when, having gone rather beyond those limits of enjoyment, he lurched in noisily, held on to the door for a minute, blinking as if he were uncertain where he was, staggered a few paces, swept the sewing to the floor without comment, strode rapidly past to the corner where the bed stood, flung himself on it at random and lay breathing stertorously with his mouth open.

Bella gazed on him, shocked, with the tears welling into her eyes.

"He's all right, my dear," said her mother softly. "Don't disturb him. I've had yer father like this now an' then—not often, but now an' then. Let him 'ave his sleep out. Make him as comfortable as we can an' let him 'ave his sleep out,

that's all, an' he'll be none the worse in the morning."

With the ready, cautious movements of one not unaccustomed to such an emergency, she began to unlace his boots, but was only just pulling off the first when, as if some consciousness of the indignity he suffered in submitting to her ministrations reached him through his sodden snooze, he stirred tetchily, heaved himself up on one arm and, glaring menacingly toward her, began to speak in accents so thick and faltering that he was almost unintelligible:

"Le' me be. D'yer hear! Le' my boots alone. Go on! You're sneakin' an' pokin' abart in my room a sight too much. You clear out of it while you're all right, an' keep out—see?" He waved a vague arm in the direction of the door. "Hear me? Go on! Clear out—d'yer hear?"

Mrs. Ward hesitated, a tremulous remonstrance rising to her lips, but Gus made an angry movement to get up, so she thought better of it and withdrew hurriedly, softly closing the door after her.

From that night a distorted idea seemed to take possession of Gus that Mrs. Ward was a costly and unwarrantable intruder upon his domestic privacy.

"She's got to go. I don't want her here, an' I won't 'ave her," he was constantly nagging at Bella. "You tell 'er I said so. She's got to take 'er bleed'n hook. She ain't goin' to stop here, you tell her so. If *I* 'ave to tell 'er, there'll be a hell of a row, so I warn yer."

Once Bella ventured a very gentle, deferential suggestion that the home and nearly all the furniture belonged to her mother.

"'Er furniture, is it?" Gus retorted irascibly. "Who pays the rent here? I do, don't I? I give you the money anyway, an' if that don't make it my place, what does? An' if she wants 'er blarsted furniture let 'er pay up for 'er keep since she's bin livin' with me, an' the sooner the better."

Bella would have pointed out that her mother was more than maintaining herself all the while, and that some weeks Gus did not even yield enough to meet the demands of the landlord, but his truculence intimidated her, and when she broached the subject to Mrs. Ward that much experienced lady besought her not to argue with him on her account.

"It's no good, my dear," she said, "no good at all. He don't mean it about me goin' really, an' contradictin' and arguin' would only make him do

it out o' spite. He's very like your poor father used to be now an' then, an' that masterful an' contrary that the on'y way to manage 'im is to pretend to agree an' give way to 'im. Humor 'im, Bella, my dear, that's the on'y way. You leave 'im to me, an' don't contradict 'im an' don't worry. I'll manage 'im safe enough."

In pursuance of which policy she was careful to dodge out as soon as Gus's step sounded in the street, and get into her own room before he entered.

Occasionally, very occasionally, by way of experiment, she would linger when she heard him and meet him with strained, wan smiles of welcome and apologetic cringes; but instead of showing signs of relenting he swore at her viciously, whenever she gave him this chance of encountering her, and once, turning on her suddenly, struck her, and hustled her out of the room with so much violence that Bella, meek and timid as she was, was stung to an outbreak of indignant remonstrance.

Which had the disastrous effect of bringing the full force of his wrath down upon herself. He was foully abusive and threatening; he accused her and her mother of sponging on him and playing the fool with him, and, lashed to a drunken frenzy by the

contemplation of his wrongs, irritated by her silence and her tears, he hit out at her, first with his open hand, then, grown reckless, with his fist.

Alarmed by the sound of blows, and by Bella's terrified appeals, Mrs. Ward, who had been listening outside, rushed in again.

"Oh, Gus, my dear!" she cried persuasively. "Bella!—whatever 'ave you bin doin' to upset 'im like this? How often 'ave I told you not to cross and contradict 'im? 'E can't stand it—it ain't to be expected of 'im—an' I wonder at you, Bella, I really do! There now, Gus, it's all right, my dear boy, an' she won't do it agen——"

Instead of accepting her specious championship as in the nature of incense, Gus swung round rampant, and gripping her by both arms shook her till her teeth chattered.

"What's it got to do with you, yer damn old cow!" he raged. "Mind yer own business. I know what yer mean. I know what you're after. I've told you before, I won't 'ave none o' your bleed'n lip, an' I've told you before to clear out o' this, and out you're goin', Mother Ward! You've had lots o' chawnce, and I don't give you no more. . . . Oh, no, you won't keep to yer back room

neether—I'm goin' to give that up, and I'm not goin' to 'ave you spyin' about on me—not for another bloomin' day. . . . Never you mind abart yer furniture. That's mine. I'll take care o' that. All you got to do is to go—an' I'll see you do it!"

He punctuated his remarks with a blow or two that she was not successful in evading.

Deaf to her pleas and wheedling protests, he half pushed, half dragged her out into the dark little passage, and then, fairly pitching her into the street, slammed the door on her and bolted it.

If other lodgers in the house were disturbed by the uproar, they were too wise to interfere. They had domestic differences of their own to attend to at times and would not presume to meddle in a neighbour's affairs uninvited.

Mrs. Ward hovered without for a while, trying to reach Gus's heart through the closed door; but he was impervious to her as to Bella, who tearfully supplemented her mother's appealings from within.

"She ain't comin' in no more. That's straight!" Gus reiterated stubbornly, with his back to the door. "If you don't want another row an' a swipe on the jaw, you go on in the room an' stop there an'

leave me alone. . . . She's got to go, I tell yer. I won't 'ave her here." He diverged into indefinite blasphemy. "If she wants any more tellin' she'll git more than is good for her if I 'ave to go out to 'er."

"Never mind. It's all right, Bella," Mrs. Ward called through despairingly, at last. "I'll go to my sister's." Fortunately she had a sister living within an easy walk. "I'll see you to-morrow. Don't you worry about me. Good night, Gus."

He did not respond, and Bella could not, for her sobs choked her; but the sound of retreating footsteps told them that Mrs. Ward had yielded to the inevitable.

She reappeared next morning, an hour after Gus was gone, and, having mingled tears of sympathy, she and Bella settled down as usual to their accustomed day's sewing. But she was careful to depart well ahead of the possible time of Gus's homecoming, and took with her enough of the tailoring to keep her occupied till bed-time.

She was scarcely out of the house when Gus came in accompanied by a perky, shabby-genteel bibulous-looking gentleman who measured and appraised the sideboard with a knowing eye, and to Bella's amazement, offered to purchase it for eight

shillings. Gus haggled with him, and by reluctant stages the price rose to ten-and-six, which sum having been handed over, Gus cleared everything out of that article of furniture and, without a word of explanation or any reference whatever to Bella, helped the purchaser to carry it to a truck that waited outside for its conveyance.

After it was too late, Bella marvelled at her own silent acquiescence in this pillage; she was completely cowed and felt she had neither courage nor strength to dare his displeasure, and so offered nothing but the feeblest ineffectual objections when, in the course of the ensuing fortnight, Gus appeared at intervals with the same bibulous satellite and cleared out her mother's bedroom, in order that the landlord might relet it, and sold those goods, and a couple of chairs and sundry ornaments from the front room, for as much as they would fetch.

Mrs. Ward learned of these proceedings, when she came in his absences, with impotent lamentations.

"Still," she argued resignedly with Bella, "I s'pose we must put up with it. It's my furniture and I *could* stop 'im, or 'ave 'im up at the Court for it, but that would only make 'im nas-

tier than ever, an' he's so masterful and high-spirited there's no knowin' what he mightn't do to us both. 'E's bin losin' heavy at bettin', you may depend, an' that's why he had to git money somehow, and when 'e has a bit o'luck it'll make 'im better tempered an' he'll buy other things in place of 'em, an' then I'll come back quietly, an' nothin' said, an' 'e'll let me stop 'ere with you an' won't care. You see. Don't say nothin' to turn 'im worse. 'E wants humourin', that's all." She stemmed the flow of her optimism and, with a dubious side-glance at Bella, added, "'E's bin a bit wild like, an' chuckin' 'is money about lately. I dessay they've told you 'e's bin seen about a lot with that Dolly 'Arris, the gel he threw over when he married you?"

Bella nodded without looking up, for her eyes had filled with tears.

"Oh, I tell yer—they're all alike, men are," sighed Mrs. Ward. "You can't expect 'im to settle down quiet all at once. But if you make a fuss it's only so much the worse for yer. I know 'ow it was with me an' yer poor father. Humour 'im, an' make 'im as comfortable as yer can an' 'e'll git tired of all this larkin' about an' settle down right enough by an' by. You see."

She spoke confidently, as one wise from experience, yet she was apparently mistaken.

The very night after she enunciated this philosophy, Gus did not come home at all. Bella sat up for him wearily, hour after hour, going often to the door to peer up the squalid, empty street, and to listen. She slept fitfully on the bed without undressing, and early in the morning, on the advice of a passing policeman, paid fruitless visits to the two nearest police stations, and, later, as a forlorn hope, went to enquire at the mineral-water factory. Here she was informed that Gus had been discharged over a week ago for assaulting his foreman, which threw some light on the selling of the furniture, though it accounted for nothing else.

For several days she continued her search, without avail. Then a rumour gained currency in the neighbourhood that Gus was living near Barking and had work at the Docks, and it coupled his name significantly with that of Dolly Harris.

On this, by a tacit understanding, Mrs. Ward discontinued sleeping at her sister's and re-entered upon residence with Bella. Little was said between them of Gus's disloyalty; through days and nights of weeping Bella came, at length, to a bleak, hopeless resignation, and the two women took up

the thread of their former monotonous living as if Gus had never broken it.

But they could not long persist in that monotony.

To begin with, there was the baby.

It was born five months after Gus's desertion and was at once recognised by all who saw it as a small rejuvenation of Gus himself; in spite of which even Mrs. Ward fell in love with it and discovered an absurd delight in sacrificing herself to its comfort and amusement; whilst Bella made it the very god of her idolatry.

And her devotion to it so revivified her devotion to Gus that her heart hungered for him more and more, and there was kindled on the underside of all her yearnings a fire-hot hatred and jealousy of the shameless hussy who had lured him away from her.

She had thoughts of going to him and beseeching him to be reconciled to her for the baby's sake, for she was a spiritless little creature of that sort and had almost no pride; but she was deterred by a dread of how he might receive her intrusion, and waited, soothing herself with a fancy that one day he would remember how she loved him, and be sorry, and come back, and everything could then be forgotten, and they would be happy.

But the baby was half a year old before he came; and this was the manner of his coming.

News was wafted into Somerset Street that Gus had met with an accident at the Docks. The news, which was already some weeks old, resolved itself into a story that Gus's leg had been badly crushed, and he was now in hospital, recovering from an amputation.

The hearing of this brought Bella to such an instant resolve that she hastened up the street to the house of Gus's family and knocked. His mother opened the door, and stared at her forbiddingly. They knew each other by sight, though they had never been on speaking terms.

"Oh, I have heard about Gus, Mrs. Parry," Bella faltered, trembling, "and they say you've had a letter from him. Will you tell me, please, which hospital he is in?"

"No, that I won't!" cried the other harshly. "If you an' yer mother hadn't nagged an' 'ounded an' driven 'im away, this would never have happened. 'E don't want none of you, an' you won't git nothink here, so don't you think it!"

Whereupon, she drew back and banged the door decisively, and Bella turned away in despair.

In the ensuing days she tramped miles to differ-

ent hospitals in search of him, but to no purpose; then, at last, one frosty evening she had been to deliver some work she and her mother had finished, and was carrying back a fresh supply in a clumsy bundle when she was aware of a familiar figure halting along Shoreditch High Street in front of her. It was familiar, yet with a difference; and the difference was that it went on crutches.

A great pity of him surged through her tumultuously, and, before she could consider how he might greet her, she had overtaken him.

"Gus!" she ejaculated.

He stopped, and stared at her.

"Oh, Gus—I'm so sorry!" she said, her heart so fluttering in her throat that she could scarcely speak. "I've been looking for you, my dear, ever since I knew. . . . I want you to come back—to come home. Will you?"

He glowered on her sullenly.

As a fact, Dolly having discreetly deserted him, he was on his way home at this moment to see how best, by humility or self-assertion, he could arrive at a compromise there. He might have gone to his mother, but, knowing the roughness of her tongue and the taunts and reproaches he would have to endure when she tired of the burden of him, he felt

he could be happier brazening out the past by his own fireside. He did not mention this, however, and his silence moved Bella to repeat her entreaty.

"Will you, Gus?"

"No. I dunno," he growled resentfully. "I'm sick of it!"

"Do come, Gus," she pleaded. "You've never even seen baby yet. He—he's exactly like you, Gus; everybody says so. . . . Will you?"

"Oh, I dunno! What yer want to keep badgerin' me for?" he snarled; then, glancing down at the empty trouser-leg pinned up out of the way, he began to whimper. "Nice sort o' thing you've bin an' done for me between yer—some of yer. . . ."

Too full of pity to feel the injustice of this innuendo, she laid her hand on his arm and renewed her gentle persuasions until he allowed himself to show signs of yielding.

"Well, now, look 'ere!—if I do," he stipulated grudgingly, "I ain't goin' to 'ave no snivellin' an' naggin' and no jaw—not from you nor your mother eether. See that?"

"Yes, dear. You know I won't. And mother wouldn't—she will be so glad to see you," Bella urged anxiously. "So will baby."

Without replying, he walked on with her, and mindful of his warning against snivelling she maintained a tactful silence all the way home.

His interest in the baby was obviously limited. He made no pretence of such pleasure in meeting Mrs. Ward again as she affected on meeting him; but he permitted her to rejoice volubly over the reunion, and tactily consented to her continued presence by his hearth.

III

If anybody had hoped, however, that the accidental loss of his leg and the acquisition of a baby would have permanently chastening effects upon Gus Parry, that sanguine person was foreordained to disappointment.

He accepted Bella's pardon as indifferently and with as much sulky complacence as if it were his of right, and she conceded it wistfully, eagerly, as if she were giving him only what belonged to him. Both she and her mother submitted to his fretful humours and yielded propitiatingly to the petty tyranny he gradually reasserted over them, in the hope that he would accept their complete surrender

so favourably that he would not insist on banishing Mrs. Ward again into outer loneliness.

And this hope was realised. He never uttered a wish that Mrs. Ward should leave them, being prompted to this magnanimity by the sage consideration that two women devoted to tailoring work could earn more than one, and might, between them contrive to support him in so much the more comfort. Also, there was little Gus—Mrs. Ward was useful in nursing him while Bella got her husband's meals ready and otherwise ministered to his comfort.

He disseminated a vague understanding that such a state of things was only tolerated until he succeeded in obtaining a situation, and the consciousness that they were aware of this fortified him in his assumption of independence and helped him to resume despotic control of his household with an easy and swaggering confidence.

The sort of employment suited to the capacity of a one-legged man seemed difficult to find. Anyhow, Gus never managed to find it. But neither of the two women, who housed and fed and clothed him and kept him in pocket-money, spoke of this in his presence; Mrs. Ward because of the wholesome fear she had of his violent temper; Bella,

a little perhaps because she was afraid of him, but more because she pitied him, and, in the strange way that women will, loved him, and was glad to have him back on any terms rather than that he should be lost to her.

So Gus spent most of his days lounging at the "White Swan"; in the bar when it was open, and outside on Sundays, gossiping with any passing pal who would linger when it was closed. At regular intervals he carried himself home on his crutches for meals. He was never told, and never appeared to notice, that though meat was always provided for his dinner there were days when Bella and Mrs. Ward had been constrained to content themselves with an earlier repast of bread-and-cheese—having it earlier so that the contrast between their meal and his might not disquiet him. And, so far from seeming to suspect their duplicity, he grumbled roundly of the shortcomings in quality or cooking of whatever was placed before him; and, now and then, when hard circumstances would not permit of their offering him anything better than the poor fare they were themselves reduced to, he would grow abusive and menacing, swear that, though he asked little enough of them, they grudged him every mouthful he ate and every penny they

granted him—that they looked after themselves all right when he was not there to see, and stinted and half starved him, and did all they could to make him feel his dependence—and all because he happened to be a cripple and so unable to work for his own living and theirs.

He harried them so often with these outrageous assertions that he brought himself, at last, to a fixed belief in the truth of them. He never wearied of reiterating the story of his wrongs to cronies who foregathered with him at the "Swan," and they invariably accepted his view of the situation, strengthened him in his resentment of it, condoled with him, and sometimes supplemented their sympathy with gratuitous beer.

"When I was all right and could work for myself," he maundered, "damn it, I worked. Didn't I, George?"

"Course you did, Gus old man," George readily agreed.

"And now I've lorst my leg, and can't get a job I can do, if it ain't my wife's place to look arter me an' 'elp me, whose place is it?"

"That's it, Gus. But these blarsted women are all alike. Don't you take no notice what they say. Let 'em jaw. You make 'em give you what you

want, an' plenty of it. I would, if it was me. If two of them can't keep you and one baby between 'em, it's becos they don't bleed'n well try, that's all abart it."

"I'll see if they won't try! I spent pounds an' pounds on 'em when I'd got it. They don't play no games with me! I let 'er 'ave too much her own way. She wanted 'er mother to come an' live along with us. I don't want her. But I let 'er 'ave 'er, an' this is all I git for it!"

"Ah! You're too easy with 'em. They do what they likes with you. They wouldn't 'ave me like that."

"You did chuck the old lady out, once upon a time, Gus, didn't yer?" struck in another. "I sort of remember 'earin'——"

"That was a long while ago, that was, an' quite right, too. I married 'er daughter, an' more fool me, but I didn't marry the old woman as well, did I? Very well, then. Think I was goin' to work for 'er an' my missis too? Not much. I may be a fool, but I ain't such a bluggy fool as that. Besides she brought it on 'erself. I stood as much of 'er as I could, then I told her to sling, an' took damn good care that she did. But, when I come 'ome after my accident, I found she'd sneaked rhand

behind my back an' settled darn in my place agen, an' I didn't want to 'ave no row, as long as she behaved herself, so I let 'er stop."

"Yus, they get rhand you. They takes advantage of yer. It don't do. These blarsted women —the more you give 'em, the more they take. Never give them nothin' at all, then they don't expect nothin'. That's my motter."

Gus acquiesced in this philosophy; and the behaviour of Bella and her mother certainly justified him in doing so.

In their meek and spiritless fashion they adopted his view of the general situation and made it their own. They forgot whatever might have given him no claim on their generosity; so completely did he impose his will and his way of thought upon them, and so anxious were they to propitiate and dwell at peace with him, that they almost ceased to murmur against him even behind his back.

As soon as he felt quite secure, as soon as he knew by experiment that he could safely presume upon the fondness of one and the fears of both, he indulged his natural inclinations without restraint. He began to levy heavier toll on their scanty earnings in order to meet his expenses at the "White Swan"; and had no qualms against ending his day

in a condition that made it necessary for one of his comrades to assist him homewards on his crutches, deposit him in a heap on the doorstep, and knock, and leave him to be taken in and put to bed. Moreover, in his worst moods, when he was drunk as when he was sober, he renewed the imperious savagery of his robuster years, and enforced instant obedience to his wishes with his fist, or by hitting out recklessly with whichever end of his crutch came handiest.

You may wonder that, at least, Mrs. Ward did not revolt against these excesses. But you have to remember that old usage had made them familiar to her and less terrible than a stranger would imagine. She had been subject to similar treatment under the rule of her late husband, and had grown to regard it as incident to the normal conditions of existence. She shrank, too, from leaving her daughter without an ally, and still more from living elsewhere in solitude, or with a married sister who had no desire to shelter her. And more than everything else—there was the baby. She had become passionately attached to little Gus, delighted to work for him and help in his upbringing, and would have been willing to suffer and make the best of nearly anything that

could happen to her sooner than be torn from his foolish, fond embraces and be shut out from all sight of him.

Little Gus distributed his affection between the two women indiscriminately. It was impossible to say which was most unreservedly and slavishly devoted to him; but each in her secret heart believed he cherished a preference for herself, and was more or less jealous of any special sign of love he exhibited for the other.

But when the boy was in his fourth year Gus himself began to reveal a marked interest and amusement in him—would tease him playfully, nurse him, humour him, make much of him; and it presently became apparent to the watchful women-folk that the small autocrat's father was fast becoming a potent rival to both of them.

"But I'm so glad he likes little Gus," Bella remarked thoughtfully, as she and her mother sat sewing, with the child asleep on the bed behind them. "It keeps him at home more than he used to be."

"Not much," sighed Mrs. Ward; adding with a sudden impatience: "I wish he'd show 'is liking by doing something else besides playing for him."

Bella did not respond. They sewed busily in

silence, with an air of having stumbled on a forbidden topic which neither had the temerity to discuss in detail.

Gus grew undeniably fond of the child, and, after a time, jealous of endearments he bestowed on any but himself. Once, when the little chap was ailing he spent most of three days fidgeting at home, nursing and fussing over him and trying untiringly to keep him amused. After his recovery, little Gus continued to exert a beneficial restraint upon his sire, though his influence with him was, on the whole, superficial and intermittent. On the other hand, Gus's love for his small son was really harmful to the boy, for he laughingly gave way to his perverse whims and fancies, insisting, with testy blasphemy if they seemed reluctant, on Bella and Mrs. Ward being equally complaisant. As a natural result, Gus junior became more and more wilful and defiant of control as he increased in years, and more attached to the father who could be relied upon to confirm and shield him in even flagrant disobediences.

Occasionally the boy taxed Mrs. Ward's patience beyond all limits. One evening Gus returned and found him crying, and, learning that he had undergone mild, but definite, correction at the hands of

his grandmother, chased the old lady about the room aiming smashing blows at her and shattering an ornament or two with his crutch, till, alarmed by the malignity of his aspect, she dodged successfully into the street, and remained there so long as his fury lasted.

"You lay a finger on 'im agen, you old hag," spluttered Gus, shaking a fist at her from the window, "and out you go, neck an' crop, like you went before, and next time you don't come back. I'll take good care o' that. If you do, I'll swing for you, you interferin' old blighter!"

By such an alliance, and with such like threats and shows of violence, he and little Gus established a joint tyranny, and for the sake of peace and in the poor hope of currying favour with the younger tyrant and through him, perhaps, with his senior, the two women subscribed to it assiduously and with a servile eagerness to please.

No sooner was the child able to walk and talk than Gus insisted on taking him out and, swinging himself through the streets on his crutches, laughed proudly to see the sturdy, squat figure trotting bravely beside him. He would exhibit the youngster at the "Swan," boasting of his quaint precocity, and his cronies there entertained themselves

by plying the small fellow with questions, and guffawed uproariously at the oddity of his answers.

By the time young Gus was seven, the company at the "White Swan" was familiar with the sight of his dumpy figure standing on the bar counter while he shrilled out a recitation of "Ten Little Niggers," which he had picked up from his mother, or piped some doubtful music-hall absurdity with his grinning audience roaring lustily in the chorus.

It was a relief to the two women, who suspected and fretted over these phases of his career, when the School Attendance Officer made an uncompromising nuisance of himself and, to escape the annoyance and the cost of a summons, little Gus was sent to school.

This, however, did not remove him beyond his father's control. Gus would go to meet him of evenings and, instead of sending him home to tea, would carry him eventually to the "Swan," where one or other of the regular attendants could be relied on to furnish the diminutive visitor with angel-cakes, and he was accorded the privilege of occasional sips from his parent's glass.

Falling so entirely under his father's training,

growing wise in his habits, adopting his ideals, admiring his truculence and, by-and-by, rising to a conscious pride in the eminence his progenitor still enjoyed among his mates by virtue of the glamorous gallantries, the raw fighting powers and rampant hooliganism of his earlier years, it was nothing strange that the young Gus should develop into a soulless, insensitive youth, whose heroes in the neighbourhood were the sorry rascals who coruscated in the local police-court, and whose private ambitions tended towards crude lawlessness and the achievement of notable but inglorious exploits.

Leaving school, in due course, he was placed, by adroit management on the part of his mother, as errand boy to a greengrocer. Gus himself surlily approved of this proceeding, for he was too shrewd not to recognise the value of a third wage-earner in the family. He was still able to monopolise the lad's leisure, to hover about him and negotiate trivial loans, when he was cornered for an immediate copper, and on Saturdays to meet him and deduct a substantial tax from his week's salary before he had a chance to spend it on himself, or before it could be abstracted from him at home and dissipated in the dull service of domestic economy.

IV

Young Gus did not remain long with the greengrocer. A fever for backing "winners," which he had contracted from his father, involved him in expenses to which the size of his income was grossly inadequate; and, with a view to adjusting the difference, he resorted to a perilous expedient of acquiring small change that did not belong to him. Now and then he had breathless opportunities to conjure with the till; now and then, with moneys paid to him by customers when he delivered goods at their doors; but the mysterious disappearances from the till and petty objections urged by more than one customer to paying the same bill twice over roused the greengrocer's suspicions and, having rather artfully verified them, he suddenly dismissed young Gus in a manner and with words that were candid but lacking in politeness.

Thereafter, young Gus transferred his activities to fishmongery; and, later, obtained a reputation of sorts in a barber's shop, a butcher's, and a furniture dealer's, narrowly evading prosecution and being dismissed from each situation for the same idiosyncrasy that had displeased the greengrocer.

Without references, he found it increasingly hard to secure regular employment, and was glad to fulfil occasional engagements in the service of streethawkers and miscellaneous costermongers who required an extra hand in busy seasons, lending unskilled assistance in stable-yards or auction rooms, or wheresoever odd jobs of any kind were to be had. In his spare hours he lounged and smoked at street corners or in public-houses with his father, and dedicated rare nights to revelry and to brilliant experimental efforts towards building up for himself a lurid and untamed notoriety in the locality that should vie with the one that his father had lost.

It was not until he was turned twenty that his promising career was abruptly and unpleasantly interrupted.

One foggy evening, under a railway arch, in a byway of Hoxton which was deserted and in course of demolition, a policeman stumbled over an impediment lying across the pavement. Stooping he discovered it to be the body of an old gentleman who had an ugly wound in the back of his head. He proved to be an old gentleman very well known in the district, who owned a lot of small house property thereabouts and, for years past, had made

a practice of going round weekly to collect his rents in person.

When he revived in the hospital, he could tell the police no more than that some unseen assailant had struck him from behind, in the foggy dimness under the arch, and a further investigation disclosed that a sum of twenty pounds or so which had been in his pockets was missing.

For the better part of a fortnight the police could not hit upon the ghost of a clue to the criminal; and, lulled to a false sense of security by this passing of time, young Gus ventured to indulge his vanity by bragging knowingly to a select few in strict confidence. Getting less cautious, with his continued immunity, he bragged once too often, and was unexpectedly arrested and lodged in a cell on information covertly supplied against him by a man he had believed he could trust.

His father, appalled at this catastrophe, went about stunned with misery, and as horrified at what might be the consequences of the crime as if it were himself he feared for.

Bella and Mrs. Ward, their first passion of weeping over, sold some bits of furniture and toiled desperately to raise money for the boy's defence. They persuaded themselves that he was innocent;

that, despite their knowledge of his degeneration, it was impossible he could be guilty of so ruthless a brutality—for they remembered him as he had been, the helpless, guileless baby they had loved and hushed to sleep in their arms, and, so remembering, it was not possible for them to believe anything so bad as this of him.

He was adequately defended by a clever lawyer. They pinched and denied themselves in every way to provide for that. In the dock he pleaded not guilty, and would say no more; but the detectives had sedulously gathered stray shreds of evidence from divers quarters and woven them into such a clear and convincing pattern that the jury brought in their verdict without hesitation, and the judge, commenting on the barbarous nature of the offence, passed a five years' sentence, telling the prisoner to think himself fortunate it had not been necessary to make the charge against him one of murder instead of robbery with violence.

To the last young Gus had cherished a blind confidence that, as nobody saw him do it, there was no real evidence, and he was bound to get off, and this hearing of his doom crushed and staggered him. He threw a bewildered glance round and saw in the crowd at the rear of the Court the worn, white face

of his mother, and the older, weary face of his grandmother, and, with the heartbreak of that vision melting him, he yielded dazedly to the touch of the warder's hand, and vanished down the stairs under the dock.

His mother obtained permission to see him for a few minutes before the prison van took him away; and her grief and her compassion and his own overwhelming sense of his calamity so broke his pride that, clinging to her and with his face hidden against her breast, he sobbed out a confession that he had hitherto withheld from everyone, and a terrible hatred and anger, such as had never possessed her meek spirit before, grew and strengthened in her as she listened.

Outside the Court she presently rejoined Mrs. Ward, and round the corner of the Street Gus, who, possibly from disagreeable force of associations, or because he shrank from witnessing his son's fate, had preferred to wait at a distance, met them with a nervous, deprecating quietness that was new to him.

"Is it over?" he whined humbly; though he knew it was, for they were unaccompanied and he saw the shadow of disaster in their eyes.

Bella walked on stonily, without replying.

It was Mrs. Ward who answered him and, too stupefied to offer any comment, he plodded on a few paces behind them, blanched and speechless. His features were drawn as with bodily pain; his arrogant self-assertion was wrung out of him, and he dragged his crutched carcase over the stones, as limp and feeble and lost a figure of a man as the passers-by had ever seen wandering abroad.

In this manner, the two women ahead of him, the man dropping continually farther and a little farther behind, they progressed silently till they reached home.

At the door of the house Bella sent her mother in, and turning in the doorway waited for Gus with a strange and daunting air of implacable resolve.

"You are not coming in here," she said, when he came, and said it with a firmness and fierceness the more terrible since they were so foreign to all he had known of her. "You may go where you like —I'll never—never have you here again. Oh, I wish I had never taken you back! If he had grown up only with us, as he was at first, and you had never come near him——"

"Bella!" he gasped. "What d'yer mean? What 'ave I done?"

"You know what you've done, you cur!—you

coward!" she cried, struggling piteously against her emotion. "You know who's brought my poor lad to this. You know who put him on to rob his masters when he was doing honest work! You know who told him to do what he is suffering for now. He knew nothing of that rent collector, or that he would have so much money in his pocket. You knew, and you made him do what you were afraid to do yourself. And where's the money? Who had nearly all the money the poor foolish fellow has stolen? . . . Oh, God, oh God!—and you his father!"

"Not so loud, Bella," he implored, aghast at her vehemence.

"I don't care who hears," she cried. "My poor boy! . . . Oh, if I had never let you come back! If I had only done my duty by him, as I ought to have done, and kept you away from him! But whatever happens I'll never give way to you any more—I've done with you. You shall not come in here!"

"Don't, Bella," he whimpered. "People'll 'ear yer. And look at me—a cripple. You won't turn me out. . . ."

"I wish I'd turned you out when he was a baby —I wish I had! Then I might have saved him.

. . . No, I'll not be quiet. I don't care who hears! If ever you dare to come here again I'll tell the police what he told me, and you shall be punished with him, as you deserve to be. . . . Are you going? Are you going? I won't hear you. I've done with you for ever and ever."

She stepped back as she spoke and slammed the door in his face.

He lingered awhile, propped on his crutches staring blindly at the closed door.

For years he had bullied and browbeaten her and she had never opposed him, never dared to rebel or betrayed any desire to do so. Now, she had suddenly turned, and he was afraid of her. Afraid, perhaps, not so much of her as of what she knew. If the boy had broken down so entirely that he had given him away to her, there was no certainty that he would not give him away to others, and that made his homestead less secure for him than he might hope to be in some place where he could not so readily be found. He had a little cash still in hand; he had friends who would strain a point to assist him in an hour of need; and, one way and another, he felt he could make shift to keep himself alive elsewhere for a while, until he was satisfied that he was out of danger. If he

defied her and went in, he felt instinctively that, in her present mood, she would carry out her threat; the discovery she had made had quenched what love for him had survived in her and roused her to such anger and hatred that, as it was, she could scarcely restrain herself from avenging her son by having him punished as an accomplice, and he would be a fool to defy her. Gus had glimmering realisations of all this, yet in her absence he could not credit the change that had come upon her.

And it was this dubiety and a last forlorn hope that prompted him to knock appealingly with the end of his crutch; and as he was timorously knocking for the third time she flung the door open.

She had not removed her hat; her eyes were red with weeping; but no softening influence of grief mitigated the surprising harshness of her look and manner.

"If you haven't gone in five minutes," she said, with a dangerous calmness, "I shall go round and tell the police what I know and bring them to you."

"But, Bella, how can I look arter meself—me like this?" he whined indicating his crippled figure with a gesture. "What's to become of me?"

"I don't care what becomes of you now," she returned viciously. "What's become o' my son?

You should ha' thought o' that sooner, when I was doing everything for yer. I don't care where you go, or what happens to yer—not now; but you're never comin' here again, and if you try to I'll put the police on to you, as sure as God's in heaven! The furniture here's mine and my mother's; we pay the rent, and you've no right here. Go away, and go where you like, but you don't come here—and I shan't warn you any more!"

With that, she drew back and shut him out again, and he heard the bolt shot.

He delayed for another perplexed minute, staring at the house without seeing it, then turned like a man in a dream and, sullenly resigned, swung himself off up the street, outcast.

V

"'E'll come back, wuss luck," sighed Mrs. Ward. "You see!"

Bella compressed her lips, and shook her head decisively.

"If he does," she said, "he won't be here long."

Mrs. Ward had uttered the same foreboding almost daily in the last few weeks, and Bella dismissed it each time with much the same answer.

And though, in so answering, she spoke perhaps

with more confidence than she felt, she drew comfort from a deep inner conviction that, for all his arrogant bluster, Gus Parry was a coward in grain; he had no fear of her, personally, but he was effectively terrified of what would probably result if she informed against him, and she could not believe he would dare her to do her worst and risk those consequences.

If he did—she was fully determined to show him no mercy, and did not think that anything could weaken her resolve.

As the weeks went by, however, her resentment lost its first fierce heat, and she was dimly troubled with a suspicion that she was beginning to relent, and hoped he would not put her to the test; for any relenting seemed a disloyalty to the son whom his baseness, and her own womanly weakness had involved in ruin.

Subservience was natural to her; she had endured much from Gus without any sense of martyrdom; but the wrong she could have forgiven if it had been inflicted only on herself she could not and would not let herself forgive when it was inflicted on her son.

"You mark me, 'e'll come back, Bella," Mrs. Ward insisted every time they spoke of him. "'E'll

stop away till 'e reckons you've 'ad time to get over it all, then 'e'll come back."

"I shall never get over it," Bella declared. "I don't care for him like I used to—not after what he's done to my poor Gus. If I hadn't taken him back after he deserted me years ago, you and me could have kept the dear lad to ourselves, mother, and he wouldn't be where he is to-day. It'll be a long while before we have him with us again, but when he comes he shan't find that man here to bring him down like this any more."

"Well, I 'ope you won't change your mind," said Mrs. Ward. "I used to feel just the same about your father at times, Bella, but I alwis gave way, at last, an' give him another trial, though I knew it was never no good. An' you're very like me. We're far 'appier without 'im, but I doubt whether you'll be strong enough to keep it up."

Bella shook her head obstinately to fortify her resolution, but was privately perturbed by the same doubt.

The most surprising thing was that for three years Gus made no attempt to return. They heard of him; as a fact, though she was ashamed to own so much to her mother, Bella instituted cautious enquiries, and was relieved to gather that he was

picking up a living of sorts as a bookmaker's tout. That was easy and congenial toil, and it was perhaps a preference for remaining among sympathetic friends beyond the chill of Bella's reproachful sadness, rather than any access of penitence, that held him so obediently in exile.

Being foolishly sensitive and spiritless, Bella trifled with a tendency to relent, until young Gus's term of imprisonment was more than half over; then, with the date of his release coming near enough to cast its shadow before, she realised anew the perilous folly of allowing him to fall once more under his father's influence, and hardened her heart again.

Not until one afternoon when the fourth year of his banishment was beginning, did Gus make overtures of any kind.

"Bella in?" he enquired of Mrs. Ward, who answered his knock.

"Yes, Gus," she faltered, a-shiver with nervousness.

"Oh, you needn't frighten yerself," he sneered. "I ain't comin' in. Tell 'er I want to speak to 'er."

Mrs. Ward fluttered into the living-room with his message, and after momentary hesitation, Bella went out to him.

She had fancied her determination might waver when she saw his face, but it did not. The seeing him again, and seeing him still defiantly unregenerate of aspect, brought the past back upon her in a flash, and nerved her for the interview.

"Well," he said curtly, "mustn't come in, I suppose?"

"You know—you know what I said, Gus——"

"Oh, don't start snivellin'!" he interrupted tetchily. "I ain't so keen on it as all that. I'm short o' brass—that's all; lorst a bit lately. That's what I'm arter. I don't arst yer to give it to me, so don't go makin' a mouthful of it. Five bob's all I want—that'll git me a bit o' grub an' save me sleepin' in the street. Goin' to do it for me, or ain't yer? That's all."

She did it for him. He accepted the cash glumly, and before she had fairly recovered her composure he was hopping off on his crutches without even thanking her.

Of course, he did not repay the loan; she had not expected that.

Twice in the next three months he called with the same object, throwing out vague hints each time which Bella, in fear and trembling, ignored, but not venturing to propose plainly that he should

be allowed to resume his place in the household. Once or twice, during the same period, he waylaid and levied toll upon her out of doors, when she was carrying work home, and she was not wholly displeased at this; for, though she would scarcely acknowledge so much to herself, she had not altogether ceased to care for him, and, curiously enough, was even a little piqued that he acquiesced so easily in his estrangement from her.

Yet, on the whole, her life had never flowed so placidly or been less clouded than now. She and her mother worked together harmoniously, and Mrs. Ward, at any rate, hoped devoutly that the new order of things might continue. She felt no pique, nor anything but profound thankfulness that Gus did keep away from them.

It was in the winter, less than six months before young Gus was to be set free on ticket-of-leave, that his father at length made a definite and rather moving appeal for permission to return home. He intercepted Bella as she was tramping from the city with a clumsy bundle of tailoring in her arms, and doggedly kept pace with her.

"Bella," he began, "I'm fair sick of this."

She glanced at him nervously, and said nothing.

"Ain't yer never goin' to give us another chance?"

"I did—once," she was trying hard not to break down, "and—and poor Gus is sufferin' for it."

"Needn't throw that in my teeth," he groaned. "Think I ain't as sorry about all that as you are?"

"That don't do him any good," she sighed. "No, you see, if I'd never taken you home after you ran away with that gel he might have grown up honest and respectable. It was you made a thief of him—you made him steal for you, and it's no thanks to you he isn't a murderer too. Yet you think I'll take you back agen," her courage and determination rose as she faced the position, "and give you the chance to harm him agen as you've harmed him already!"

"I don't want to 'arm him," he interposed sharply. "If I did—well, we was thick pals, me an' 'im was, and I shall see 'im when 'e's out, don't you fret! I daresay 'e'd sooner come to me than you, if I ain't at home."

Bella shrank as if he had struck her. She had been sometimes harrowed by a dread of this possibility, and now that he had shaped it in words it seemed real and imminent, and a danger to be no longer ignored.

It was borne in upon her confusedly that what she had done for her son's sake might now, for his sake, have to be undone. This thought took such hold on her that, though she put him off for the moment with a contribution of cash, when Gus lay in wait and made a similar appeal to her a week later nothing but the fact that her mother was lying dangerously ill deterred her from yielding to his importunities.

"It's no use talkin' of it to-day, Gus," she said wearily. "I did say you should never darken my door again, and God knows I meant it. Anyhow, I can't alter my mind yet—not with mother ill in bed an' needin' to be free from worry, an' me—what with havin' to look after her—scarcely earning enough for the two of us."

"I can't git nothin' to do," he complained. "That bookie I was toutin' for—'e's gorn to America, and if I 'adn't got meself took up by a religious charity, this cold weather, I'd 'ave bin starved to death."

"I'm sorry, but I can't help it, Gus," she reiterated. "I'll manage a shillin' or so, but it's no use askin' me to do no more, not till mother's better."

And, to guard against her instinct to relent, she

quickly slipped a trifle into his ready hand, and hurried away.

But Mrs. Ward was not destined to get better, and did not especially wish to.

"I'm old, an' tired of everything," she said, feebly. "I don't like leavin' you all by yourself, Bella—else what is there for the likes o' me to go on livin' for? But never you 'ave that man back, my dear—you're 'appier an' better off than you ever were with 'im, or ever could be."

In which settled conviction she died; and was buried.

She was buried on a bleak, depressing afternoon in a crowded East London cemetery, and Bella was her only mourner. That is, she was the sole occupant of the one mourning carriage; but as she stood weeping by the grave, while the coffin was lowered into it, she was disturbed by a muffled groan beside her, and, glancing round, saw through her tears that Gus was propped on his crutches at her elbow, with his face hidden in his hat.

No words passed between them. She was so miserable that her resentment against his being there, remembering his many unkindnesses to the dead woman, was leavened by a healing sense of the ceremonial fitness of his presence and the

respect it implied, and by a vague consolation in having somebody there to make even a show of sharing her sorrow.

She moved away when the parson had said his last word and all was finished, and Gus halted after her. She climbed into the mourning coach, and with a lift from one of the undertaker's men, who took it for granted that he had been invited, Gus climbed in also and, looking inconsolably wretched, dropped into the opposite seat.

"Ah, she was a good sort, Bella," he moaned. "I was roughish on 'er now an' then, but I allers liked 'er, an' I believe she liked me—for some things."

Bella neither agreed to nor disputed this. She was completely subdued and broken; she was alone in the world and obsessed by a helpless feeling that circumstances were too strong for her and it was of no use to contend, that she could merely yield, in quaking fear and hoping against hope to whatever the future might bring to her.

VI

The grief of Gus, and certain hazy religious notions he had imbibed from the religious charity that had recently relieved his distress, may have

been diluted with hypocrisy, but somehow they made it easier for Bella to hoodwink herself into believing that she was not acting unwisely and that there would practically be no risk now in his reunion with young Gus.

Moreover, he had undoubtedly changed in various ways. He was quieter; these latter years had chastened him and taken the cruel edge from his temper, or he had it more under control. Possibly, too, he was really anxious to school himself to a contrite and engaging disposition that should incline young Gus to a first favourable impression of him when the hour for their meeting arrived. That, at least, was the meaning Bella liked to read into his altered demeanour, and there seemed no other plausible interpretation of it.

"We'll go and meet the boy together," she said to herself; "then it won't matter much which of us he'd prefer—he can come home with both of us. I'm not jealous, so long as I can have him with me. And I don't feel so afraid about Gus as I was. He's had a warning and he was always fond of him, and will be glad to help me keep the dear fellow straight after all that's happened."

She mapped out a blessed future, over her work, in which the reformation of Gus senior should con-

tinue, and young Gus should rise to proud heights of prosperity and respect.

When the day of his release was only a week ahead they both began to grow restless and tensely anxious. On the appointed morning they were up at daybreak, and Bella, having regained and refurnished the other ground-floor room that had used to be his, saw that it was in neat and perfect order, tidied the living-room, in which she and Gus slept, put some flowers she had bought overnight in a small vase on the mantelpiece, and laid an appetising breakfast, which they would not sit down to, they decided, till he was there to share it with them.

Gus was wrought to such a pitch of excitement during these preparations that he suddenly burst into tears and begged Bella to put in a good word for him if the boy still nursed any bitterness toward him; and his tears so touched her that, being overanxious also, she had much ado to restrain herself from hysterical weeping. So that when they were calmer and went out into the sunny freshness of the early morning they were drawn to each other by a poignant understanding and sympathy that made them more at one than they had been these many years.

There were several waiting—some rather furtively—in sight of the prison gateway at Pentonville, patient women and men, on similar errands to theirs. They took up a position a little apart from these others, and waited patiently with them.

At intervals, a narrow door in the great gate opened, and a man came out dazedly into the sunshine and was received by friends with laughter and covert weeping, and departed in their company.

Presently, the door opened for the fourth time, and a young fellow, lean, sullen, indifferent, emerged and, scarcely troubling to glance around, slouched leisurely off.

"That's 'im!" Gus whispered, husky and tremulous. "You go an' speak to 'im, Bella."

She was hastening forward already and he trailed haltingly in her wake.

Young Gus caught sight of her with no glimmer of pleasure or surprise in his surly visage. Apparently he would have passed her without a word or sign of recognition, but she laid a quivering hand on his sleeve.

"Gus, my dear," she quavered, "we've come to meet you—me and your father."

"Might 'ave saved yerselves the job," he snarled

ungraciously. "I ain't comin' with you—I've done with the pair of yer—that's straight. See?"

"Oh, but my dear boy," she sobbed in an agony, "we want you—we want to make up to you——"

"Don't try that game with me!" he laughed sourly. "I can take good care o' meself—an' I mean to. I met a cove inside there was let out last week, an' fixed up to go an' join 'im. That's where I'm goin' if you must know. You'd like me to come an' keep you both I dessay—but not me! So you can le' me alone. I ain't comin', see?"

"Why, Gus, ole pal," his father struck in with a forlorn and empty affectation of cheerfulness, "ain't yer goin' to give us yer 'and?"

Young Gus turned on him with a withering blast of profanity.

"You miserable old blighter—if you wasn't a cripple I'd show you what I'd give yer!" He swung round on his mother. "You know what he done for me, and you told me you'd chuck him, the sneakin' swine! But you've got him still, 'ave yer? Well, then, you stick to 'im! I've done with 'im, damn 'im! 'E don't make a mug o' me no more. I can play me own games, an' I'm goin' to. D'yer 'ear? Le' go o' my arm I tell yer!"

"Don't be so hard, Gus," she pleaded. "Come home with us, my dear. He's bitter sorry——"

"Be damned to 'im, so 'e ought to be! No, I shan't come. I shan't come. Le' go—d'yer 'ear!"

He grasped her thin wrist, and snatching his sleeve from her fingers made a swift rush at a passing tram, leaped on the step, and, almost before she realised that she had lost him, was carried rapidly out of sight.

She stood gasping and crying out incoherently for a minute, then turned in a frenzy; but all the anger in her heart died at the sight of the haggard, despairing, white face that stared piteously back into hers. It was her own misery, her own despair that gazed on her from his eyes, and she was stricken dumb in the glance of it. There was no use in saying anything; there was nothing they could do. She had foreseen this; she had brought this on herself; and it was too late for repentance or reproaches.

Mechanically she slid her hand under his arm and led him away.

"Oh, my Gord, my Gord!" he whimpered as they went. "What are we goin' to do? Whatever shall we do? . . . Wasn't my fault. Why did you let 'im go? If I could only run. . . . Why

didn't yer go after 'im? Oh, my Gord, my Gord. . . . Can't yer speak, woman? I don't believe you care a curse about it! Oh, my Gord, oh, my Gord!—I wish I could take it quiet like you do!"

A SPOILT IDYLL

"HUL-LO! Excuse me, sir, you are not Mr. Hillyer—Mr. Ben Hillyer?"

"Guess I am, stranger. But you have the advantage of me. I don't seem to recognise——"

"I'm Tom Watts."

"Never! Not old Tom Watts of——eh? But now I look at you, great Cæsar!—why, of course it is. Lordy, put it there!"

The traveller dropped his portmanteau and held out a sinewy brown paw, which the other grasped heartily.

"I only landed at Liverpool this morning," cried Mr. Ben Hillyer, "and here if old Tom Watts isn't waiting to meet me at Euston as if he'd known I was coming!"

"Thought it was you. I knew you the moment I set eyes on you," declared Tom, laughing. "If I'd known you were coming I *should* have been here to meet you—you can bet your bottom dollar on

that, as you Yankees say, for I suppose ten years of it makes you one of them. And, now I have met you, I shall stop for a chat, and miss my train and go on by the next. As a matter of fact, I wasn't waiting for anybody. I'm on my way to Manchester. Been living there these last three years. Eh? . . . What a row that engine makes! Oh, yes! Capital appointment in Manchester. Had to be something good that could tempt me to quit little old London, I can tell you. Been doing a fortnight's holiday. . . . Come in here out of the crowd."

"Well," Mr. Hillyer resumed, when they were seated in the refreshment room on the platform, "I've been coming home for long enough past, but something or other always turned up to hinder me. I've had to write half a dozen times to postpone the visit after I'd fixed a day for coming. And, at last, now I've come, I've come in such a rush I've never even written to tell anybody I was on the way."

"Take 'em by surprise, eh? And how have you been doing out there? You're looking wonderfully well, and not a day older than when you went away. Come alone?"

"That's so."

"No Mrs. Hillyer yet, then?"

Mr. Ben Hillyer shook his head, with a quiet smile. And, after regarding him curiously for a minute, Tom Watts broke into a chuckle, smacked his kneepan resoundingly and, glancing round to make sure nobody was likely to overhear him, he went on in subdued tones.

"I'd forgotten. Why, what did you go out for? To be sure! And who is there in the old country you'd come over to see, if it isn't her? Of course!"

Mr. Ben Hillyer did not dispute the proposition.

"Ten years!" ejaculated Tom Watts. "Mean to say neither of you have changed your minds in all that time? My gracious, if it doesn't beat fairy tales! Young man—young girl—poverty—all the good old-fashioned ingredients—young man goes to—Boston, was it?—to make his fortune—young girl waits. . . . How is the fortune, Ben? Made?"

"The foundation's laid, and the scaffolding's up," laughed Mr. Ben Hillyer, "and there's enough of it built to keep the rain out. Yes; I've done very fairly, Tom. Got a solid business out there. When my old boss died two years ago I arranged to take over the whole concern and run it myself. I run it still in the old man's name. In fact, I've pretty well dropped my own. Only use it when I write letters home—and I've never written to anybody

but her; and of course she uses it when she writes to me. That's all."

"Then you've not come over for good?"

"I calculate not."

"Making a flying visit to finish up the fairy tale—that's it, eh? Ten years! I never believed that sort of thing when I read of it in books, but when it comes out of the books and sits down and tells you about it—I give in! I never was a romantic fellow myself."

There was nothing about Mr. Ben Hillyer's appearance to indicate that he was romantic either. He was perhaps half-way through the thirties, and looked his age; his eyes were keen and grey, his bronzed, good-humoured face slightly bearded, his whole aspect as ordinary as it possibly could be.

"Did you ever see her?" he asked.

"No. You used to tell me of her; but I don't even recollect her name."

"What do you think of that?'

Mr. Ben Hillyer drew a somewhat faded portrait from his pocket and passed it to his friend. It was the picture of a young girl of eighteen, a graceful, dainty figure, posed against a dark background that made the face look pale. There was a tenderness in the sweet, half-smiling features, a shy

wistfulness in the large, clear eyes that instantly won the liking of the beholder as well as his admiration.

"If she's as good as she looks—and I'm sure she is," said Tom Watts emphatically, "no wonder you waited ten years for her."

"I don't believe there's a finer, truer girl on earth," returned Mr. Hillyer, not without some touch of emotion. "She's no doll, my boy. When that girl's mother died—her father was dead before I knew her—she took her place in the shop and she's kept it going for the last five years, and supports herself and two younger sisters, with no help from any living soul. That's the kind of girl she is. All the same, if you'd read her letters you'd know she's still got as much romance in her as I have—if you call it romance."

"She deserves to be happy—and she will," said Tom Watts, returning the photograph. "Drop me a line and ask me, and I'll get a day off and come to the wedding. And, if you want a best man, and don't know the address of a better one—there's my card."

Having left his luggage at an hotel near the station, Mr. Ben Hillyer went as fast as a taxi could carry him to the eastern end of the town.

Halfway along the Commercial Road he dismissed the cab and, walking a couple of hundred yards, paused before an ancient, low-browed coffee-house, dingy and dull externally and exhibiting in its windows two pale chops and a steak on a small plate with an edging of tomatoes, a selection of eggs, a piece of bacon, a stack of tea-cakes, a framed price list, and some theatre bills.

There was a shabby, inferior air about the shop that gave him a curious shock and rather damped his ardour; he marvelled he had never been struck by the meanness of its appearance when he was so familiar with it, years ago.

He entered with an indefinable reluctance. Within, the shop was close and dark, and filled with unappetising odours of miscellaneous cooking. It was long and narrow, with gloomy, high-backed boxes on either side for the accommodation of customers, and, at the end, a low counter, behind which was a secluded space where the frying and boiling and washing-up were done. Piles of plates and dishes, cups and saucers stood on a long dresser, and similar articles adorned the wooden rack above it; while from an end of this recess that was out of sight a thick steam floated and hung in an attenuated cloud all across the ceiling.

Hesitating, overcome by an unaccountable nervousness, Mr. Ben Hillyer stepped aside into one of the boxes, instead of going, as he had intended, to the counter, and when the frowzy waitress came to attend upon him he ordered a cup of tea.

From where he sat he could keep watch on part of the area behind the counter. An ancient female there was washing crockery in a tub, and the frowzy waitress drawing his tea from an urn. From the invisible depths, whence the steam floated, arose a high-pitched, feminine voice, monotonously scolding somebody in connection with a disaster to some baking operations.

All the while he was sipping his tea that scolding continued, the fretful, complaining, intolerant tones grating on his nerves like snarlings of a handsaw. He was yearning for a glimpse of that face whose picture had been his companion and consoler through the tedious years of his absence. He had looked forward to this day longingly and with extravagant anticipations; in sleeping and in waking dreams he had lived through this hour, through this meeting now so near, more often than he could have told; and if, so far, the reality did not fully justify those dreams—surely the actual seeing her, touching her hand, hearing her speak, must

make amends and surpass all imaginary raptures.

His thoughts were broken in upon by the frowzy waitress saying to a man in the next box:

"Yes, in one of her usual tantrums. Fair sickening, it is! Been at it like this all day, very near."

"Kate!"

It was the complaining voice raised to a higher pitch; and, answering the call, the waitress scuttled off, vanished round the counter, and could be heard out of sight involved in rebuke and heated argument.

She reappeared later, subdued and sullen, and presently the owner of the voice that had scolded her became visible at the counter, where she proceeded to make fresh tea in the urn.

At his first glimpse of her face, Mr. Ben Hillyer started, a peculiar choking sensation constricted his throat, and he shrank back as if he feared she might observe him. She was a stoutish, full-faced young woman, with an anxious, harassed, discontented expression; a large coarse apron concealed most of her faded print dress, and the sleeves were rolled up above the elbows of her red, rough arms. To a stranger, the resemblance between this buxom, rather slatternly female and the photo-

graph in Mr. Hillyer's pocket might have been imperceptible, but to Mr. Ben Hillyer himself it was at once and devastatingly apparent. He could even trace something vaguely familiar, now, in the altered voice; yet he made a desperate effort to think he was mistaken—that this assertive, practical termagant and the shy, tender, sympathetic girl he had loved could not possibly be one and the same person.

The ideal he had cherished during all these years was not to be instantly removed from its shrine and replaced by such a reality. Of course, he knew ten years were bound to have changed her; he had come, nevertheless, expecting to find the grace and beauty and sweetness of the past merely matured; and had found——

The disillusion stunned him. He was in no mood just then to remember how constant she had been; how nobly she had faced the sordid business of life when she and her sisters had been left alone in the world, or how impossible it was for any delicate nature to engage in such stern combat without becoming hardened, coarsened, perhaps embittered. Nothing of these changes had revealed itself in her letters, and he felt it the more keenly because he had been wholly unprepared to

find any great difference in her. He realised only that he had been deluding himself with vain fancies, that the woman he loved and had come so far to meet no longer existed.

The whole experience seemed so crushingly unreal that, with a forlorn idea of assuring himself of its certainty, he remarked to the waitress as he was paying her for his tea:

"Miss Walton seems—that is Miss Walton, isn't it?"

The girl nodded sulkily.

"The eldest?"

"Yes. The others don't live here now. Couldn't stand her."

"Oh? She seems rather put out."

"She's never anything else," snapped the girl.

And as she evinced no disposition to prolong the conversation, and his dread that the woman might see and recognise him suddenly renewed itself, he rose hurriedly, and passed into the street.

He was dejected and miserable; but, the more he thought of it, the surer he was that he had acted well in coming away without making himself known. He might have concealed his true feelings from her and forced himself to redeem his promises, but was it likely such self-sacrifice could tend, in

the circumstances, either to her happiness or to his? He knew in his heart it was not. It would have been brutal to have faced her and told her of his disenchantment; he could not bring himself to write and tell her; yet, after what had happened, he could write to her no more as he had used to.

He was seized with a craving to get back to his work; to put the sea betwixt him and this piteous catastrophe; he saw no hope for either of them except in forgetfulness.

And on the voyage home a way occurred to him in which he might remove himself from her life and leave her free to lose all remembrance of him. The contemplation of such a subterfuge could not be other than repugnant to him, but he could think of no alternative, and argued that, all things considered, the deceit was justified. Already the girl he loved was dead to him; it remained for him to die to her.

Late one evening, less than a month after he had so come and gone, the postman walked down the coffee-shop in Commercial Road and left on the counter a newspaper addressed to Miss Walton.

It was handed to her as she sat by the fire-place busied over accounts, and, seeing by the stamp that

it was from America, she opened it at once. She opened it with a strange sense of apprehension, for she had been expecting a letter which was a month overdue, and the paper was addressed in handwriting with which she was not acquainted. Turning over the pages, she came at length to a marked paragraph in the list of deaths, which ran:

"Hillyer.—May 10th, at 98 Kirstall Avenue, Boston, Benjamin Hillyer, formerly of London, England."

Nothing more. She read it three or four times before its full purport took hold upon her, and she understood he had been dead nearly three weeks. Then—for a habit of reticence about her private affairs had increased upon her, and she shrank from the thought of humiliating herself by a show of weakness before her dependants—she put the paper aside indifferently and made a pretence of going on with her accounts, till, finding it too hard to maintain such unnatural self-control, she rose abruptly and went upstairs.

The cook and the frowzy waitress, whose curiosity had been stirred by her demeanour, took advantage of her retirement to open the paper and read the marked passage; so that when, after a

while, Miss Walton came down again, they affected to be unconscious of the redness round her eyes and the unaccustomed quietness of her manner; they involuntarily spoke to her with a new respect, obeying her wishes with a promptitude that was alien to them, much as one humours and seeks to anticipate the whims of an invalid.

Next week brought a typewritten letter from an unknown Edward Smith, of Boston. He enclosed a bank-draft, for a thousand pounds, saying it represented the savings of the late Mr. Ben Hillyer, who had desired that she should have them. He mentioned that he had forwarded a newspaper containing a formal notice of his friend's death, which had been very sudden, and concluded his communication with orthodox expressions of regret.

Only her few immediate friends know why Miss Walton wears the mourning she has worn so long, and not all of them know who erected, in the dismal East London cemetery, a marble cross to the memory of "Benjamin Hillyer, who died at Boston, aged thirty-nine," nor whose name is one day to fill the space that is vacant under his.

THE FUGITIVE

"WHO's that? What are you doing here?"

There was a strip of garden in front of the flats; something moving in the shadow of the privet hedge by the railings caught John Greville's eye as he closed his umbrella at the entrance before going in, and he went back to see what it was.

At the sound of his voice it had become motionless—something that cowered closely between the hedge and the wall and, blurred by the misty rain and the darkness of the early autumn night, might have been either a lurking animal or merely a bundle of some sort that had been hidden there.

"Come out of that! What are you doing here?"

John prodded enquiringly with his umbrella and, as he reiterated his question, was aware of a scared, white face peering piteously up at him.

"It's all right," came a husky whisper. "I'm all right. I'm not doing any harm."

"What are you after, then? If it's the rain

you're sheltering from you'd be better off in the door-way."

"It's all right. Not so loud, sir." The man had risen, a wet, shivering, miserable object, and stood before him in an attitude of abject appeal. "For God's sake, don't give me away! Let me pass, and I'll go."

"Give you away? What do you mean?"

"Well, I know I'd no business to be in here."

The poor wretch's mouth was grotesquely agitated and tears were trickling down his cheeks. "I've had no food since yesterday, and I'm a bit queer—a bit weak, I suppose." All the while he was glancing aside between the railings, in a furtive, apprehensive manner. "I only came inside here for a rest—that's all. I was feeling too done up to walk a step further."

The air and tone of the man, his haggard, anxious looks, the nervous restlessness of his hands were so full of anxiety and dejection that John was touched with compassion for him.

"What's the trouble? Come up into my place," he said shortly. "You're soaking, and this rain will get worse before it's done. I can give you a meal anyhow. Come on. You needn't be afraid; I'm all alone here. I don't know what you've

been doing, and don't care—that's no affair of mine; but you'll be safer up in my den than you are down here, that's a sure thing."

For a moment the man hesitated; he threw an irresolute glance again along the deserted street, as if he had thoughts of dashing out and running away; then, as John plucked at his sleeve and repeated his invitation, he yielded resignedly, and they went in together.

There was no lift in the building. They climbed the stone stairway to the top floor, where John opened his compact bachelor flat with a latch-key, and switched on the electric light.

Within a few minutes he had cooked a meal of eggs and bacon on his gas stove, and sat smoking and looking ruminatively on from the other side of the kitchen table whilst the stranger fed himself with a ravenous abandon.

"Rather rough and ready," John remarked apologetically, "but I keep no servant and, as a rule, get all my meals out, except breakfast. I flatter myself, though, I am a fairly good cook at a pinch."

The stranger nodded appreciatively.

"I tried living in furnished apartments and hotels, but it didn't suit me—not my style," John

continued, sociably making conversation. "I hate rules and regulations, can't bear to be tied to time, so I prefer a flat of my own, which may have disadvantages, but leaves me to be as free and easy as I choose. I'm that kind of chap."

The stranger nodded again and, refilling his glass for him, John added, with a ready sympathy:

"Things may have been free enough with you lately, but you don't look as if they'd been particularly easy. Eh? What's the trouble?"

The other eyed him with a flickering uncertainty; the grateful warmth of the room, the food and the beer seemed to have melted him, to have loosened his tongue, to have unsealed within him tremulous yearnings towards confidential talk.

"I'm in an awful mess—a hell of a mess. If you knew the truth about me," his voice quivered, his eyes were blurred with tears of self-pity, "you'd turn me out—if you didn't lock me in while you went for the police."

"I'm not a cad," said John quietly. "Besides, you don't look like a man who can have done anything uncommonly bad. Whatever it is, don't worry so far as I am concerned—I always leave the police to do their own dirty work. Still—don't tell me more than you feel I can be trusted with."

He laughed, and leaned back, thoughtfully regarding the man through the smoke from his briar.

There certainly was nothing in his appearance to suggest that he was at all a desperate character: nervous, slightly built, delicate looking and, like John himself, still on the better side of thirty, he had a simple, native frankness of expression that even the watchful fear in his eyes could only partially obscure. He was well dressed, if you made allowance for the draggled appearance the rain had given him; and his speech and bearing were, at least, those of a man of education.

"You will think me a maudlin kind of fool—but I can't help it," he said brokenly. "I have been wandering about hiding these last four days, and gone absolutely hungry since yesterday, and I'm weak and not myself, you know." He paused to subdue his agitation. "I was on my way home just now, to see my wife, and then I meant—I can't stand it any longer—I meant to go and confess and let the police take me."

"What's it all about?" queried John, with gathering interest. "Money?"

"Well, in a way—partly. But worse than that it's——" The word choked him, and he stopped,

and began again. "You read the papers? . . . I am Richard Murdock."

John started, and stared at him aghast.

"Good Lord!" he ejaculated; and when he had somewhat recovered himself: "Of course, the papers have been full of you. I have read all about it, and—oh, well, so far as I can make out, there were excuses for you—nearly everybody thinks so—and the other fellow damn well deserved what he got."

"Thank you," Murdock faltered huskily. "But I'm afraid the law won't say that."

"Afraid not," John agreed.

A silence fell between them; and, by and by, having made an end of his meal, Murdock sombrely resumed:

"I must have been mad. If I was, it was he that drove me mad. You've read how it all happened. But you don't get quite everything in the papers. . . . I was married to the dearest girl in the world, and we were happy enough, though we were beggarly poor. Then, three years ago, my uncle, my mother's brother, died and left me a fortune, and his share in a great business, on condition that I adopted his name. I knew nothing of the business—didn't understand it, and was glad to

leave the whole management of it in the hands of my uncle's partner, and he robbed me, as it turned out he had been robbing my uncle. I never doubted him, till it was too late, and he did what he liked with me. He induced me to invest pretty well all I had in the business—said he was anxious to extend it, and it would soon be yielding me double my previous income. Then the crash came, and, when the creditors were satisfied, I was ruined—as poor as I had ever been—but he still had plenty . . . in some underhand fashion he had taken care of himself. That was hard enough but I could have faced that. It was what my wife told me—had to tell me. . . . She told me how that blackguard had pestered her with attentions—things he had dared to say to her last year, when she had ordered him out of the house but, for the sake of peace, felt it was wiser not to mention it to me. And now, in my absence, he had come to her again—thought he could take advantage of our poverty—thought that would make a difference to her—and I found her crying, and she had to tell me. Without letting her know, I took my revolver and went round to him that night. . . . But I've gone over and over it whilst I have been wandering about the streets—and I'm not sorry I did it—

I should do it again—You've read what happened and you don't blame me?"

"It's what I should have done myself," said John emphatically, "in your place."

"And you're not going to give me up?"

"What do you think?"

"No. I feel I can trust you—you have been very kind. . . . But I meant to go to the station and let them have me, only I wanted to see my wife again first. I was on my way to her, and as I was passing here a policeman turned in at the end of the road, and I'm so horribly unnerved that, before I knew what I was doing, I had dodged in at the gateway and was hiding in your garden. I'll go on and see her now, then I'll throw up the sponge and they can do what they choose with me. They are bound to get me sooner or later, anyhow. I have no money on me, and can't bear the suspense and the misery—anything's better than that."

"Don't be a fool! Wait awhile," said John sharply, motioning him to sit down again. "I am not a very sentimental person, but, to tell you the truth, when I read this case of yours, I sympathised with you immensely, and hoped with all my heart you would slip safely out of the country. If it isn't a hanging job—and I'm not sure that it isn't—it

will mean a life sentence, and—well, look here! if I can help you to escape I will."

He was a young man of strong and generous impulses and accustomed to acting on them; and something in the gentle helplessness and wistful simplicity of his visitor's attitude of mind appealed to him.

"Really?" exclaimed Murdock, eager and half-incredulous. "You are the best—the kindest——"

"Never mind that," John interrupted. "Have you any children?"

"None."

"That simplifies matters. If your wife could join you secretly"—John planned the escape hurriedly whilst he was speaking—"if we could lead the police to believe she was still at home, the two of you might nip out of the country with less likelihood of detection than if you travelled alone."

"But how could that be done?"

Murdock shook his head doubtfully.

This idea of saving the fugitive from his pursuers, however, had taken hold of John. His sympathies were roused; and there was a spice of adventure in the undertaking that stimulated and excited him. The other's hesitation only made him the more obstinate in his resolution; he was used to

having his own way, and always, when opposed, was the more determined to have it. The mere outlining of his scheme in words and filling in some of the details, fixed him unshakably in his desire to see it successfully carried out.

"It can be done, I tell you," he insisted, "and if you and your wife get away abroad—anywhere—nobody need know who you are, and you can start afresh and forget that all this ever happened. All it wants is a little pluck and a little money. Has your wife any money?"

"She has relatives who could find some for her," said Murdock, beginning to be infected with his host's optimism, "and they would be ready to save us and themselves from this disgrace."

"I can weigh in with a trifle myself if necessary," cried John. "Give me her address. Write a note to her and I'll take it."

"Wouldn't it be better for me to go——"

"Do you imagine they are not watching your house? If you go they will collar you before you can open the door."

"I expect they would, when you come to think of it. . . . But they might follow you back."

"I'll see that they don't. I sometimes hire a car from the garage of a fellow I know round here—

I'll ride there in that, and I'll take jolly good care they don't follow me when I come away. Leave that to me. You write the letter—as quick as you like. You could stop here safely for a week, if we can't arrange things sooner—they wouldn't dream of looking here for you. How could they? You write the letter—just tell her what we are up to, and, once we know about money matters and when she can be ready, and whether she is sure she can dodge out and join you without the police knowing she has left the house, we'll soon arrange everything else."

In the flush of this headlong, irresponsible enthusiasm, with the sense of risk and chivalrous championship exhilarating and sustaining him, John hastened out to hire the car, and within twenty minutes was knocking at Mrs. Murdock's door.

The maid who opened it was reticent and subdued. She was not certain whether her mistress could see him; asked the nature of his business, and whether he was a newspaper reporter; and finally shut him outside whilst she reluctantly carried in his card.

She returned almost immediately, and this time ushered him into the drawing-room without demur.

He looked at the pallid, beautiful face of the woman who came forward to greet him, and, for the moment, could not believe his eyes. She held out her hand, as if she took for granted he had come expecting to see her, but he could only stare at her in speechless amazement.

His blank surprise, his strangeness, rebuffed her. She dropped her unnoticed hand and said doubtfully:

"You wished to see me, Mr. Greville?"

"Maggie!" he gasped; then, seeing his own bewilderment reflected in her gaze, he went on confusedly, "I was not expecting to see you. I did not know—I thought your husband's name was — Of course," he corrected himself, remembering, "he told me he had changed his name when he came into his fortune—but I never dreamt —it never occurred to me that you were his wife."

"Have you come from my husband?" she asked in an excited whisper.

"From Richard Murdock—yes," he replied absently, for he was still absorbed in a blind chaos of thought and emotion.

"Where is he? Is he safe? Can I go to him? Oh! They haven't—they haven't found him?"

"He is quite safe," said John. "He is at my flat."

Then, recollecting the letter, he drew it from his pocket and gave it to her.

A curious constraint had come upon him; his enthusiasm had burnt itself out, and his mouth was dry as with the ashes of it; he was depressed, distraught, vaguely resentful. The sight of her tears and her agitation as she read the letter stirred no pity in him, and when she looked up, tremblingly, and would have thanked him, he checked her with something of irritation.

"I had no idea he was your husband. He came to me by chance—a stranger," he said, "and I offered to bring his letter to you."

"He says he is in hiding at your flat—where is that?"

He told her, and she resumed anxiously:

"It is very good of you, John. He says you will arrange——"

"If I can—I don't know that I can," he interrupted her tetchily, and resented her seeming assurance of his friendliness. "I simply came to let you know where he was and see if his friends would find enough money——"

"They have," she broke in. "I have money here

ready to help him, and have been waiting till I could hear where he was. Will you take me to him? Can I go back with you now?"

"That would never do," he declared sharply. "This house is watched, and if you leave it with me we shall be followed, and—" He shrugged his shoulders significantly. "We shall have to be cautious. We must have time to think. You have the money—that is the great thing, and, if you will be ready at a moment's notice, I will let you know as soon as possible when and where you can join your husband, and what plan he decides upon."

This disquieting, unexpected meeting with her had so shaken him that he hardly knew what he said; he was talking more or less at random. He fluctuated between a renascence of his old anger which meanly prompted him to reproach her with this sorrow she had brought upon herself by her unfaithfulness to him and a dull rage against the man who had broken her heart and her pride. He wanted to escape from her presence before he betrayed these feelings that were rioting within him—to escape from her and think of what he was doing in the light of the knowledge that flashed upon him when he entered and found that the

man he was protecting, and that man's wife, were those who had embittered his life and done him a wrong he had once sworn never to forgive.

She questioned him closely, as if his reticence dimly alarmed her or she were fretted with an instinctive distrust of him; but he firmly dissuaded her from any intention she had of accompanying him, promised he would contrive to send a message to her in the morning, and was glad to be out of the house, driving off through the dark streets, free to surrender himself wholly to the whirl of sinister imaginings that were clouding his mind and subtly overmastering all but his deep sense of personal wrong and a shameful rankling desire to retaliate.

He did not at once head the car for home; he wanted time to think. He had turned the corner in the opposite direction when a motor-bicycle dashed past him; when it was well ahead of him it stopped abruptly, the rider sprang off, and, standing directly in his path, signalled him imperatively to stop. Wondering and irresolute, he slowed down and obeyed. In an instant the cyclist was on the step of his car.

"You have just come from the house of Richard Murdock," he said. "Who are you? I am a police

officer. Do you know anything of his whereabouts?"

"What if I do?" John answered sullenly, without pausing to reflect, and blaming and justifying himself instantly with a thought that they had got him, and would, anyhow, take care to go with him and find where he lived and satisfy themselves about him.

"You know he is wanted. Where is he?"

John remained silent.

"You must come with me to the station," said the officer sternly. "There it is, where the lamp is, a little along the road."

"It's nothing to do with me," John began.

"Drive slowly, and I'll come alongside," snapped the other. "If you try any tricks it'll be the worse for you. I've got your number."

There seemed no help for it; John assured himself that Fate had been too much for him and this catastrophe was no fault of his.

He moved forward slowly, the officer keeping pace with him, and at the station pulled up and got out.

The officer followed him up the steps into the office and closed the door.

"I saw this man leave Murdock's house a

minute ago," he said to an elderly inspector who was seated at a desk, "and he admits he knows where Murdock is."

"Is that so?" the inspector demanded.

"I did not know who he was when he came to me," said John, thinking rapidly and still uncertain of himself and the course he should take. "I was sent to his house with a message from him and—and when I discovered who he was I meant to—I was on my way round here to give information."

"Where is he?"

"Waiting at my flat."

"Where's that?"

John felt there was nothing for it but to tell them, and he briefly explained how Murdock had fallen into his hands.

"Wait a moment," said the inspector, and he pressed a bell.

A constable came promptly from an inner room.

"Tell Jenkins and Evans I want them."

The constable withdrew, and a junior inspector immediately arrived with a plain-clothes detective in his wake.

"Go with this gentleman, Jenkins—take Evans and Watts with you—Murdock is at his flat. You have got the warrant."

"Yes, sir." Jenkins turned to John Greville. "Is he armed? Is he likely to be dangerous?"

"I think not. I know very little of him. He is no friend of mine," said John. "I never set eyes on him till a couple of hours ago. But he seems harmless enough."

It was not until he was in the car with the inspector and the two other officers that he fully realised the enormity of what he was doing—that he was playing Judas to a man who had trusted him. He tried to justify himself with arguments that he had no choice; the position had been imposed upon him; his hand had been forced by circumstances he could not control. But behind these sophistries was the knowledge that he had trifled with a sinister thought of betrayal, though he was confident he would never have acted on it. He was horrified and perplexed as with hazy memories of things he had done, or fancied he had done, in some outbreak of delirium. Now he was sane and calm again, and marvelled that even the thought of such baseness as he was stooping to should have been possible to him. He was haunted by a vision of Maggie's piteous face and her tears when she spoke of this man she loved whom he was helping to entrap. But what could he do now?

He had gone too far, said too much to have any hope but to keep her in ignorance of his treachery.

"He must not know I have put you on to him," he impressed upon the Inspector, who sat beside him as he drove. "You and your men can wait at the foot of the stairs, and I will go up and tell him the way is clear, and that he can safely slip around at once and see his wife. Then you can drop on him as he comes down."

"Don't want to have any blundering," the inspector demurred. "How can I be certain of knowing him?"

"When he comes out I'll slam my door loud enough for you to hear," said John. "There's no lift, and only one staircase, and you'll hear his footsteps all the way down. There can't be any mistake. It will be pleasanter for me, and better for yourself—you can keep me right out of it, and take all the credit for the capture. Here we are."

Having satisfied himself that there was no lift and no second staircase, the inspector accommodated himself to John's suggestion. He posted his two men by the wide entry, and took the precaution of following John up to the second floor, and there waited.

It was now past eleven; the place was as quiet as

if all its tenants were already abed; and, listening, he heard John, two floors above, let himself in with his latch-key. Then came a minute or two of silence; he was uneasy, doubting the wisdom of the course he was taking, and had climbed a floor higher, when suddenly an upper door slammed, and there was a hurry of feet on the stone stairs.

The inspector ran nimbly, quietly down, gave a word of warning to his men, and stood a few yards beyond them in the centre of the pathway. The steps on the stairs grew rapidly louder; they crouched back alertly, and springing forward to grasping the flying figure that emerged—it was John himself who burst upon them, breathless and excited.

"Gone!" he ejaculated.

"Gone?" echoed the inspector, incredulous and suspicious. "What do you mean? You said he was here."

"So he was," John rapped out an oath. "He was to stay here while I took a note to his wife. I expect he must have had doubts about me—fool that I was!—and wouldn't risk waiting—guessed I should bring you with me. . . . But we are losing time. He would have gone to his wife instead of me, if I had not said I would take his

message that he was safe here. It's a hundred to one he has gone there now, and if we go straight back we may be in time."

The inspector was fiercely chagrined, but every moment was precious.

"Give my men the key of your flat," he said, adding to them, when they had it, "Go up and search the place and stay there for me."

And he and John scrambled into the car and were off again in a twinkling.

Why he had proposed this course John did not know; it was the first idea that occurred to him in his bewilderment, and he could not believe Murdock had been such a fool as to go home, but he had to say and do something or he would be suspected of complicity in his escape. Yet there was no knowing—the man was half out of his senses with terror and misery: suppose he had been seized with a panic-stricken distrust of John and gone recklessly to see his wife, as he had said he would?——

At Mrs. Murdock's house the startled servant came to the door and told them her mistress was out. She had not seen or heard her go; could not say when she went, but was positive she had gone; and, as she was alarmed at this strange disappear-

ance and was only too thankful to have them go in and search the house, the inspector had soon convinced himself that she had spoken the truth.

He was completely at a loss. He left John in the car while he went to consult certain furtive, shadowy sleuths, who were on duty watching the premises, and came back with reports from them that Murdock had not called, and Mrs. Murdock had not been seen to quit the house that day.

"She was undoubtedly here when I called," stammered John, "just before I came on to you."

"Drive back to your flat as hard as you can go, Mr. Greville," said the inspector shortly.

"He's not there——"

"My men may have found something. Quick as you like."

They lost no time on the road, and when they got back found the two officers waiting for them with the outer door open.

"Nothing here," said one of them. "No sign of him. We've searched everywhere."

But the inspector preferred to search for himself. He glanced round the lobby, as if hoping some clue might have been dropped; examined each of the rooms, peering under the bed and into cupboards and behind curtains, all to no purpose.

"Strange!" he exclaimed. "What time was it when you last saw him here?"

"Less than half an hour before I first saw you." John repeated again how he had discovered Murdock in the garden, and out of pity, because the poor wretch was wet and hungry, and not guessing who he was, had brought him in to give him a meal; and how later Murdock had revealed his identity and begged him to take a note to his wife. "It was awkward, but I promised to take it—what else could I do? And then I was coming to you when your man stopped me."

"What was the letter about?"

"Merely to let her know he was safe, and to say he wanted to see her, and then he would give himself up, as he felt it was impossible for him to get away."

"Why didn't you bring that note to us?"

"Oh, well, I was bound to keep my promise to the poor devil," said John, "and I saw no harm in letting his wife have it."

The inspector was grimly displeased; he asked many shrewd and some futile questions, made full notes in his pocket-book and, declining an offer of refreshments, departed with his myrmidons, and, with a sigh of relief, John bolted himself in for the night.

Then he walked back into the kitchen and stood with his hands in his pockets, thinking. He had been near to being guilty that night of the meanest, basest act he had ever stooped to; he had thought of it, but could not believe he would really have done it, and could not feel sure that he could place to his credit the fact that it remained undone. Just now, when he was going through the flat with the inspector, he had noticed, on the pegs in his bedroom cupboard, a suit that did not belong to him, and that a suit of his own was missing, but he had not called attention to this. Perhaps because he really had no desire to put his pursuers on the track of the fugitive, perhaps because he was anxious to shield himself from all appearance of complicity in his flight, or perhaps merely because he was too startled, for the moment, to make up his mind what to do and so remained silent. He had lost all faith in himself and his motives and was a little ashamed to recall the conflicting impulses that had swayed him in the last hour; his self-control seemed to have broken down for a while; he did not now know what he had meant to do—things had just happened, and, confusedly acquiescent, he had just let them go on happening.

As he stood ruminating so, with his hands in his pockets, he remembered vividly what he had found when he ran up here leaving the police below, waiting for him to send Murdock down into the ambush they had prepared for him. He had burst into the room, meaning, he believed, to carry out his plan of betrayal, for he saw no alternative that would not involve him in probable disaster; but Murdock was not there. He switched on the lights, glanced hastily into the other rooms; then, coming back, noticed a sheet of paper lying on the kitchen table and found it was a letter for himself —a letter which a glance showed him Maggie had written. He had been alarmed and angry that the man he had befriended should have vanished like this, without any thought of the predicament in which he was leaving his benefactor; but a swift reading of the letter quelled his anger though it could not subdue his alarm. He realised that delay would bring suspicion on him, and rushed at once from the room with no idea but to announce that the bird was flown and as best he could, by act and word, vindicate his own innocence.

Now, when the danger, so far as it had threatened him, was past, he drew the crumpled

paper from his pocket and read again what he had read before while he was too distracted to grasp more than the essential fact that was written on it:

"Dear John,—I could not wait. Directly you had gone I came here. I went out at the back and climbed the walls of the gardens to the end of the road and got away in a taxi without being seen. The taxi is waiting. I scribble this while Dick is changing into some of your clothes, because of the descriptions that are out. I told him to, and knew you would not mind. I am afraid I shall not dare to risk writing to you—not for many years—but if you do not hear you will know we have got away safely and are happy somewhere, and that we owe all our happiness to you. It breaks my heart to think of the sorrow I once caused you, but I feel you have forgiven me. God bless you always. I shall never, never forget you and your wonderful kindness to poor Dick. I love you for that, and we shall both love your memory. You are the noblest and kindest of men. In great haste. We are just going.—MAGGIE."

And they were gone. He glanced round the room, which looked strangely deserted, and could picture her leaning over the table and hear the rapid whispering of her pencil on the paper.

He burnt the letter, for safety; he may, too, have had a sense of relief in destroying a reminder of gratitude that somehow disquieted him. And when he rose next morning the whole episode seemed far off, and dim and unreal as a nightmare.

For some days the newspapers were dark with veiled hints of clues that were in the hands of the police and the probabilities of an early arrest. He was visited once or twice by detectives, who closely cross-questioned him, but could find no grounds for doubting that he had done everything he could to assist them. Then, by degrees, the topic staled and the press abandoned it. And when the weeks and months had lengthened to a year and still no tidings came from Maggie, John knew that she and her man had successfully evaded pursuit and were happy somewhere, and honouring and blessing his name who had so magnanimously rescued them from despair and given them that chance to be happy.

AN INTERRUPTED ROMANCE

The trouble with Amos Crapp was not that he couldn't earn as much as other men of his craft, but that, when he had paid for the inordinate beer supply essential to his personal sustenance, the surplus left out of his week's wages was scarcely sufficient to keep his wife and children in bread and cheese.

This was a harrowing circumstance to a man of his disposition, and the sight of his wife's pinched, complaining face and his children's neglected looks naturally irritated him so much that he spent as little of his time at home as possible.

On occasions of domestic affliction when medicine or superior food must be had for the invalid, he soothed his anguish and tided over the emergency by begging what he could of his wife's relations and pawning bits of the furniture. But this, in the result, only added to his tribulations, for he was presently on speechless terms with his wife's relations, who seemed to expect him to give

them their money back, and exasperated by a shortness of household utensils and the naked aspect of his rooms.

One night, after sedulously irrigating his constitution with its customary nourishment, he arrived home to find his children sleepless with hunger, and his wife, amid the shabby salvage of their furniture, abandoned to tears. His feelings were considerably lacerated by this inconsiderate display; indeed, her reception of him betrayed such a completely unsympathetic attitude of mind that, in the first bitterness of his resentment, he—not to put too fine a point on it—punched her and blacked her eye.

She was not so nice looking as she had been once upon a time, nor so spirited. Having become inured to his peculiarities, she neither offered opposition to his displeasure, nor reproached him afterwards. And in the morning the appearance of her eye was a fresh trial to him. He was hurt that she did not consider his feelings a little and, at least, try to be cheerful and make his life happier. Before going out to work he counted up the balance remaining from his last night's expenses, and, finding it to be eightpence, deposited fourpence on the table for the benefit of his family.

It was more than he could comfortably spare, but fortunately this was pay-day, and an occasional impetuous generosity was one of his redeeming features.

"Look a-here, now," he said, with the calmness of despair, "I'm sick of all this snivellin'. I can't stand it. No man could. So I tell yer straight—you won't see no more o' me. I ain't comin' back home here agen—not no more—so you needn't expect me."

The woman attached no meaning to his words; he had said that sort of thing too often; but that night Amos Crapp did not return.

When a week or two had passed and vague rumours reached her that he had not only left his place of employment but had departed beyond the cognisance of all who knew him and had, moreover, taken the precaution not to go unaccompanied by the refining influences of feminine society, the woman began to breathe freely, and to hope he, at last, really meant what he had said. For though, strange as it may seem, she had loved him in the beginning, her love had long since been submerged in misery and changed to fear and detestation.

Being a willing and capable woman, and resolute,

for all her submission to his will, she promptly set about working for the maintenance of herself and her children. She was clever with her needle, and supplemented odd jobs of charing with sewing work for the slop-shops, for private customers, for anyone and everyone who would employ her.

And so it came to pass that within a couple of years she had regained something of the hope she had lost and gathered a comparatively comfortable home about her. She was happy; and the children were better fed and clothed and found life pleasanter without their natural protector than ever it had been with him.

Another four years went uneventfully by. The eldest boy was sent out to employment, and so lightened his mother's burden, and they were humbly prosperous and contented. All this while no word reached them of the fugitive. They felt no inclination to bestir themselves in search of him, and the woman was even allowing herself to entertain a settled conviction, born of his long absence, that he was dead and she emancipated from his authority for ever.

Latterly, having decent clothing, she had turned her thoughts towards religion. The chance visit of a local evangelist was responsible for this; she

went to his mission hall, and, soothed by his teachings, formed a habit of regular attendance, and the youngsters went tractably, though not so willingly, to his Sunday School.

Now, one of the leading spirits of this mission was an honest, steady-going artisan, a certain Ben Summers, who distributed hymn-books among the congregation at meetings and helped to take collections; and within a short time he began to pay marked attentions to Mrs. Crapp, under the evident impression that she was a widow. He was unaffectedly a genial, genuine fellow, and it happened that, in spite of herself, his comeliness and simple sincerity inspired her with a real and increasing regard for him. Wherefore, when his visits and his interest in her were grown unmistakably significant, much as she shrank from the ordeal, she thought it best to anticipate what was coming and explain to him precisely her matrimonial position.

He heard her disclosures with grave disquiet and undissembled distress, but, having questioned her, was disposed to believe, as she did, that, since she had heard no news of him for so many years, her husband was in all probability dead.

But the uncertainty was not to be ignored, and

thereafter he waited patiently for a year, making no secret of his growing attachment. They were the very best of friends, though no word of love had passed between them; and they arrived at a tacit understanding that nothing but the doubt of their being no obstacle to their union restrained him from asking her and her from consenting to be his wife.

At length, even his patience began to exhaust itself.

"It is eight years now since he left you," said he. "Surely no law of man or God condemns us to go on wasting our lives like this on the chance that he may be alive."

She shook her head, not knowing how to answer.

"I have been talking things over with a friend who knows more of legal matters than I do, and it seems to me," he resumed, "there is only one thing we can do. I'll advertise in some English, Australian and American papers for him, and if we hear nothing inside another year it will be allowable to take it that he's dead. Will you marry me then?"

She hesitated wistfully. She was still under forty and contentment and happiness had revived her whole nature as well as her good looks, and

loving him as now she did, she suppressed her hesitancies and gave him the promise he asked for.

Four months of that year were gone, and the advertisements had elicited no response. They had lived in daily fear lest their very efforts to raise themselves above disaster should plunge them into it, but nothing coming out of the silence these fears were giving place to hope, and even confidence.

Then one evening the woman went home from a service at the mission; her two younger children were with her, the elder being not yet returned from work. Ben Summers, who accompanied them, said good night at the street door, which, for the greater accommodation of the various lodgers in the house, stood always open, and they passed upstairs and into their living-room.

Immediately Mrs. Crapp lit the gas, one of the children ran and clung to her with a startled, terrified cry; and glancing round she saw the burly figure of a man on the couch. Their entrance had awakened him, and he was sitting up, blinking in the sudden light. The first swift glimpse she had of his bearded, sullen face froze the heart in her breast and sent a numbing horror through all her senses.

While she was still dumb with amazement and dread, he spoke.

"Well," he growled, peering at her with bleared and blood-shot eyes, "it's me; that's who it is. Want me, don't yer? Want me so badly you've bin advertisin' for me, and 'ere I am, so you orter be glad to see me."

She remained mute and motionless as if stricken to stone.

"I seed it in the paper over in the States—in Washington, an' I raised the wind and come home. She's come to her senses, I thinks, and means to behave 'erself and wants me back. But I'll be damned if you seem so mighty pleased to see me now I 'ave come."

He laughed again.

"I didn't want you if you didn't want me, an' a 'ell of a time I've been 'avin' of it to oblige yer, but you," he waved a hand to indicate his surroundings, "you look as if you'd bin doin' pretty well for yerself."

She neither heard what he said nor saw him, though she never for an instant turned her eyes from his face. The new, fair life she had lived lately; the newer, fairer life she had dreamed of—these were irrevocably lost. It was as if this man

had come back out of her bygone night of wretchedness and struck them dead there suddenly at her feet.

"Ha! Well, you needn't tell me no secrets. I know all abart it," he grinned sourly. "I've found what you was advertisin' for. Not because you was so fond o' me. A bloke in the Green Dragon at the corner told me all about it. A good young man, is there? And I shall knock that good young man's notion on the head. Reckon you've saved a bit, an' that's what 'e's after, but I'm here, and I'm here to stay. You wanted me, an' advertised for me, and you've got me. What more do you want? Why can't you say something, eh? What's the game? Don't stand glarin' at me, damn yer, as if you didn't know me!" He had obviously been drinking, and there was the old dreadfully familiar menace in his husky tones. "I'm tired after my long journey. I want some grub, and—here! I ain't got a brass farden, an' I'm about dried up. Git a move on an' go an' fetch me a jug o' swill from the 'Dragon.' Go on—d'yer 'ear me?"

She was heart-broken, utterly stupefied with grief. She could feel the old loathsome life closing about her again, serpent-like, and she was power-

less in its toils. In a flash, she saw the rooms made bare and desolate, herself and her children hungry again and neglected; but this was her lawful lord and master, and she could see no hope but in making the best of things by propitiating him with dull submission.

"Damn an' blarst yer!" he roared, starting to his feet and shaking his fist at her. "You've had it all yer own way—you wanted me back, an' you've got me, and now I'm goin' to have what I want for a change. Don't you try none of yer games with me, or—" She shrank trembling as if the blow had already fallen on her. "Hear me? By Goramighty, if you ain't fetched that beer inside three minutes I'll bash yer sniggerin' face in!"

She was too cowed to think of defiance. It had, in the days she had been near forgetting, become natural for her to obey him in abject fear of his violence, and with his return the dormant habit reasserted itself.

Still without speaking, she reached a jug from the shelf mechanically, and went out.

CHARITY

I

In her own circle it was commonly agreed that Carrie made a fortunate marriage when she became the wife of Eric Warner.

For she had been only a dressmaker's "hand," and he was a managing clerk somewhere in the City, who habitually wore a tall hat, a frock coat, and, among other elegancies, some little jewellery. It was understood, in short, that he was a gentleman, and the size of his salary was referred to with considerable respect.

Perhaps none of those affectionate friends who congratulated Carrie envied her more, in secret, or made more disparaging remarks about her when she was absent, than her sister Mary would have done, if Mary had not been rather strictly religious and convinced that all envy was wicked.

She was older than Carrie, and had married three years earlier; and her husband, Jacob Bowles,

was an ordinary poor man, and looked it. Not by taking thought or subjecting himself to any course of training could he ever hope to compete with Eric Warner in manners or appearance; moreover, his salary was too small to be spent or spoken of with freedom.

Yet he was a good enough man in his way, and these things troubled him little, if at all. He was simple and unambitious, and grew to be innocently proud of his brilliant brother-in-law, even to the extent of boasting about him to his acquaintance and magnifying his importance.

Mary accepted the situation more seriously. Nothing but her religious beliefs kept her from being dissatisfied with her lot and ashamed of Jacob. She felt her younger sister's social superiority acutely—or, at least, realised that she would have done so had she been a worldlier woman than she was.

And it cannot be denied that Carrie was fond of finery and showy appearances. Her dresses were expensive and made with exceptional taste, while Mary's were cheap and plain and had a home-made look about them. When they visited each other, too, the same jarring contrasts were manifested in their domestic economy. Carrie would

set her table out with silver and serviettes and such like vanities; but Mary's board was humbly furnished at the best of times.

Mary could not but notice these disparities, and the significance of them was distinctly offensive to her. Who could doubt that Carrie emphasised them with the deliberate purpose of making her feel her inferiority and what a gulf there was between them?

"I don't like it," Mary admitted. "I thought she would have been above that kind of thing. I am disappointed in her."

"P'raps she don't mean nothin'," ventured Jacob. "Maybe it's only her way."

"I don't care—I don't like it——"

"I don't bother myself——"

"I'm quite as good as they are, and in justice to myself I think I ought to let them see I know that—in justice to myself and to you, Jacob."

"Oh, never mind about me, missis."

"No! I daresay! The way you always knuckle down to him, Jacob——"

"Well, he's a decent enough chap. Him and me is all right. He does bounce a bit, I know; but then, he's a clever chap, Mary; cleverer than me, anyhow; an' I don't mind."

"No. You've got no proper pride, Jacob. You'd let anybody wipe his boots on you. That's where it is."

"I always thought you were agin pride, my dear."

"Not proper pride. I'm not proud, but I'm the elder sister, and I hope I know what is due to me, to my self-respect. Who are they, I should like to know? Surely I'm as good as my own sister!"

But she went to church next Sunday, and the music and the sermon together lifted her to such a lofty spiritual altitude that she was able to look down on Carrie with a beautiful pity and pardon her—until Monday morning.

"They only strive after the treasures of this world, which are not worth having," she said resignedly. "We are happier without them."

And Jacob was glad of that; for he saw very little prospect of their ever getting them.

II

In the course of some five or six years, Carrie had two children; which was another distinction Mary might have resented had she been less regenerate,

for she had none. As it was, her sole regret was that Carrie did not bring up those children of hers more satisfactorily.

"She pampers and spoils them, Jacob," was her opinion. "She dresses them so extravagantly, and teaches them such high and mighty manners—such affected airs—. Dear me! their father might be heir to a peerage, at the very least."

"Well, my dear, if it pleases them——"

"Oh, it's the children I'm sorry for, poor things! What can you expect them to be like when they grow up, with such a training?"

"It's no good, old gel. We can't help it."

"That is no reason why we should approve of it. I must say what I think. Such impoliteness—such airs—such pride and wasteful extravagance! And did you see the new watch-chain he had on this evening?"

"Eric? No. I didn't notice particularly."

"Solid gold. She gave it him as a birthday present. As if she couldn't give him something useful! Says she saved up for it out of her housekeeping money. How much do you think she paid for it?"

"Give it up."

"Ten guineas."

Jacob whistled.

"Ten—guineas!" Mary repeated. "She told me herself. A sin and a shame, I call it—such wicked waste!"

"It's all right if they can afford——"

"But they can't! I don't care if his salary's twice as much as they say it is—what do they want with gold chains at that price—in their position? All done for show! They're living beyond their income—I'm sure they are—with their servants and their haughtiness and seven o'clock dinners, and—oh, I haven't patience with such goings on!"

Probably an impartial observer would not have been aware of these objectionable features in the life and manners of Mr. and Mrs. Warner. They liked to be admired, it is true, and were fond of high talk and display; they dressed well, lived well, and certainly did not err on the side of economy—otherwise, they were a kindly disposed folk, genial, hospitable, and blindly ignorant of the annoyance they were causing Mrs. Bowles.

But a day came when their glory departed from them.

Eric lost his situation.

Precisely how he lost it nobody appeared to

know. Sinister rumours got afloat of moneys embezzled from his office, and a prosecution mercifully abandoned; but as nothing certain was known all the friends of the family were able to believe the worst.

The one indubitable fact was that Eric was out of employment.

Presently he and his family declined into cheap lodgings, and grew unostentatious, and even shabby; and for a year or so he picked up a precarious livelihood, travelling on commission in the coal trade. By now they had removed to Camberwell, but the Bowles's still remained at Willesden; so they did not visit each other during this period, and kept up but a desultory correspondence.

Then, one evening, a letter from Carrie announced that her husband was dangerously ill. It was a humble, distressful letter, saying they were in sore need of help, and would be grateful if Mary could lend them a pound to tide them over immediate difficulties.

Mary's mouth hardened, and she passed the letter to Jacob.

"What did I say?" she cried. "I knew what they would come to. And suppose you were taken ill, who would help us, I should like to know?

They have brought it all on themselves, and now they want to make us suffer for their folly. It isn't right or just, and I will not do it. They wasted all he earned, and more—they never attempted to save anything themselves, and it's not right, Jacob, that your hard-earned savings should be frittered away on members of my family who have been so grossly improvident."

"But if the poor chap's ill——"

"It's a judgment on him. We should never see it back. The Good Book says, Pride goeth before a fall. As they made their bed—there it is! You might be laid up—I've got to think of you. It's your money, and they're not your people. It hurts me to refuse, but I must consider you, Jacob, if not myself; and it would not be fair to you."

Jacob was not anxious that his small hoard should be dissipated; he knew, too, that to argue with her would only increase her obstinacy; so he listened and said nothing.

By return of post Mary wrote a nice, sisterly epistle to Carrie expressing her grief, and how gladly she would have done anything in her power for them, but she explained that Jacob's salary was so small that really they had not always

enough even for themselves; she did not like to ask Jacob to break into the trifle they had put by for the rent and things, and hinted that they had lived sparely within their income and avoided extravagance, all along, otherwise she did not know how they could have managed at all. She suggested that some of Eric's well-to-do friends could better assist them, if asked; sent her love and Jacob's to them both, with kisses for the children, hoped Providence would aid them, and undertook to remember them in her prayers.

But Providence did not go to their assistance; and Eric's well-to-do friends seemed to wait for it to give them a lead; for a fortnight later came another letter from Carrie, humbler and more appealing than the first. Eric was still ill, she said, but slowly improving; they had sold nearly all they had of value, and were practically destitute—"even while I am writing this," she wrote, "the children are crying for food."

Jacob was touched; Mary herself was not unmoved. But saving had become a mania with them—with Mary especially—and the thought of reducing their modest balance in the Savings' Bank gloomed over them cloud-like.

This second appeal had come by the last post

on a Saturday night, and they went to bed perturbed and undecided.

Next morning at church, however, Mary relented; the pathos of the music and the sermon sensitised her moribund emotions, and melted her completely. This and a flattering vision of herself going as Lady Bountiful to that afflicted family urged her onward to a high resolve.

"I will go down there directly after dinner," she told Jacob, on the way home, "and take them two pounds. That is all we have in the house. If he is really ill and they are starving—why, of course, we must do it. It is a Christian duty. They have brought it all on themselves and don't deserve anybody's help, but we must be charitable Jacob, and you must try to forgive them——"

"So fur as I'm concerned——"

"It isn't for us to judge them, Jacob. They are suffering for their own folly. But blessed are the merciful. We shall never get it back—we can never expect any return, but we won't think of that. The Lord loveth a cheerful giver."

Jacob having a slight cold, and one rail fare being less than two, she went to Camberwell alone.

The journey was long and dreary, and it came

on to rain soon after she started; consequently she arrived at her destination wet and tired and out of humour. Her enthusiasm had waned and died on the road, and she was beginning to think if she gave them a pound-note it was more than she could strictly afford and as much as they would expect.

She found their lodgings comfortless enough, but not so desolate as she had pictured them to herself; and, though Carrie was not looking well, she did not look actually ill, nor had she discarded all her genteel affectations. The children did not seem desperately unhappy either, and were still passably dressed.

Mrs. Bowles noted these details, and was vaguely dissatisfied with them.

She went with Carrie to say a few sympathetic words to Eric, who was in bed, and apparently somewhat broken in spirit. Afterwards, she sat in the dingy little parlour-kitchen, and listened to Carrie's story of their tribulations, and wept with her, even while she fumed now and then within herself because she fancied that Carrie still retained airs of superiority and did not rightly appreciate how entirely their social attitudes toward each other had been reversed.

"You must have suffered terribly," she agreed.

"We have sold almost everything worth anything," said Carrie. "If I had not got four shillings last night on Eric's trousers and waistcoat we should have had no dinner to-day."

"Dear, dear, how terrible! And what has become of Eric's gold watch-chain?" enquired Mary, in tones of kindly curiosity. "It was an expensive one, wasn't it?—and ought to be worth a good bit."

"Oh, the one I gave him once, on his birthday?" said poor Carrie, her eyes moistening. "That was one of the first things we parted with. We pawned it at Willesden, before we left there. The second year's interest is due on it next week. I could hardly spare the first, but I hoped to get it out for him some day. But we cannot afford to pay it this time, and I can't ask anybody to pay it for us. He will be so sorry to lose it—and I didn't want him to—but it is beyond us now—it will have to go."

"How much is it pawned for?"

"Two pounds."

"That's very little. It cost ten guineas, didn't it?"

"Yes. But I would not borrow more on it—

it was my present to him, and Eric thought if it was not much we might be able to get it back before long. But——"

She sighed, and shrugged her shoulders hopelessly.

"Well, my dear, we can't afford such extravagances, Jacob and me. You know that. But we want to do whatever we can for you, and if it would be a help to you at all—we can pinch and scrape and make it up somehow—we will buy the chain for, say, a pound. I'm afraid we can't afford more. We've never been able to buy that sort of thing. There'll be two pounds and the interest to pay at the pawnshop—about three pounds ten altogether. A lot of good money for the likes of us, who are only poor people. But at a time like this — We really don't want it, of course, but we are anxious to do our best. . . ."

Carrie hesitated.

"Eric won't like letting it go——"

"It's no use to him where it is," said Mary, bridling somewhat. "He'll lose it if he can't pay the interest, and it will pay him better to sell it to us than to lose it, I suppose."

"Yes," Carrie assented tearfully. "He won't like letting it go, though, because I gave it to him."

"Oh, well, please yourself, dear. You know best. Only I thought the money might be more useful to you just now than a watch-chain which you can't redeem. But don't part with it if you'd rather not."

Carrie had risen.

"Don't say anything to Eric about it. We need not tell him," she said. "Wait a moment. The ticket is in the next room. I will fetch it."

And on the following Sunday, when Jacob accompanied his wife to church, Eric's watch-chain glittered magnificently across his waistcoat.

THE SPECTRE OF A SIN

THE streets had been swept by a flaw of rain that left the air cool and the pavements glistening. A light of sunset blazed above the western house-tops, and the shining, tumultuous city was spanned by the fairy arch of a rainbow.

Along Aldgate High Street pedlars had drifted back to the kerbs, and, filtering out from places of temporary shelter, the stream of pedestrians on each side of the way swelled to full tide again.

The roll of wheels, the tramp of feet, the babble of many voices blended to a surging monotony of sound, a drone so insistent and unvarying that a scream which shrilled of a sudden broke through it as startlingly as a lightning flash breaks from the vast blackness of a storm. A scattered shouting of excited voices followed it; everybody within hearing paused, and faces of enquiry were turned all in one direction. Out in the road, in the thick of the rush of traffic, where motor-buses, wagons and carts were speeding this way and that in close

procession, a vociferous van-driver was tugging at his reins; his horses were rearing affrightedly, and a terror-stricken child sprawled under their lifted hoofs.

In that same breathless instant some men and a woman sprang forward from the arrested crowds, but the woman was first. She plunged recklessly for the child, snatched him out of danger, and coolly, jauntily, though with a slight unsteadiness of gait, threaded her way back with him to the pavement where a younger woman with a baby in her arms stood weeping hysterically.

This woman, the mother of the rescued child, was a timorous little creature, pale, and pretty in a homely fashion, and well but plainly dressed. The other, tall and yellow haired, made a noticeable figure in her scanty-shabby finery; her faded good looks had been plentifully restored with rouge, and she radiated an undeniable odour of ardent spirits.

"Here y'are," she cried, with rough friendliness. "The kiddy ain't hurt. Take 'old of him and gi' me the baby. I'll carry it for yer a bit. You take 'old of him an' pull yerself together, my dear."

The change of burdens was readily effected, the

distracted mother catching up the elder child and kissing him frenziedly, as if she could scarcely yet convince herself that she had him safe.

"He was holding my dress as we crossed the road," she explained brokenly, "and I did not know he had left go until—oh, my dear, my dear, God bless you for it."

"Now you try an' quiet yerself," urged the other, "Gord don't want to worry hisself about me. The little chap's right enough. Which way are yer goin'?"

The two walked on together and, the crisis being past, the crowd thinned out about them and lost interest in their welfare.

"I don't know how to thank you," faltered the mother presently. "Whatever should I have done! . . . You—you saved his life——"

"Oh, Lord!" laughed the other carelessly. "Stow that! Somebody else would ha' done it if I hadn't. He'd ha' jumped up hisself in a jiffy without nobody helpin' him, wouldn't you, Johnny, my love? Don't you fret. Goin' far?"

"Only to the chapel in Commercial Street. My husband will meet me there. He is going straight there from his office. Oh, but, my dear, I wish," she glanced at her companion with a diffident

compassion, "I do so wish we could do something to show you how grateful we are. Do you mind telling me if—if there is anything we can do—anything, my dear, to help you?"

She was so hesitant, so timid, so humbly fearful of giving offence, yet what she was thinking of her benefactor was so transparent, that the other woman laughed outright.

"Lord love yer! I'm past all help, I am. I'm all right."

"Don't say that, my dear," pleaded the little woman tearfully. "We owe our boy's life to you. Tell me where you live, and do let us——"

"Oh, I live in all sorts o' places. Don't say any more about it."

They walked for a minute in silence, then:

"I don't know your name——" Though the mother of the children gave her an opportunity the other left the blank unfilled—"but—I shall remember you always in my prayers."

"That's all right, dearie, that won't do me no 'arm, anyhow," said the outcast, indifferently; "nor it won't do me a fat lot o' good eether, I expect."

By this they had turned into Commercial Street, and were close upon the iron gateway of the chapel,

a sombre, unlovely building sandwiched between two shops.

"I should be so glad if—if you would come in with me," ventured the mother, nervously.

The other laughed again.

"No, thanks. Don't fancy myself in a pew! . . . Why, what would the good people think of yer? Can't yer see what I am, without me tellin' yer? Can't everybody see it?—an' be damned to 'em!"

"But, my dear," they were standing now at the entrance, "please don't be angry with me—you have been so kind—so good—and I can't bear to leave you like this. I am so afraid you are not—you are not happy——"

"I shouldn't be no happier sittin' in no bloomin' chapels!" Seeming instantly to repent of her harshness, she added apologetically, "I know what you're thinkin', dearie. I daresay you reckon I'm goin' to hell in a non-stop, and so I am. I'm there already. My life's hell enough for any poor devil. But I was as good as you are, once," she went on bitterly, "an' might ha' bin still, if it hadn't bin for a bloke I used to know. Same old story, dearie—dessay you've heard it before. I was a young mug them days, an' he bamboozled me, yer know

—promised I was to be his wife if I bolted with him, but 'e sloped as soon as he was sick o' me, before I got the marriage lines, and I ain't set eyes on him since—lucky for him! I couldn't go back home then, y' see. There was a kiddy that died, an' there I was! It was the streets or starvation; an' he'd spoiled me for a saint. That's all. And it's all right. What's it matter? All the same in a hundred years!"

"Oh, I'm so sorry, my dear. But I don't like to let you go away like this. Will you—I wish you would wait and let my husband thank you. He will be here——"

"Not if I knows it, thank you! Preachin' at me only makes me swear. I don't mind you. You are a good little thing. But—— Here, cop 'old of the baby, an' I'll cut!"

"Alice! What's the matter?"

It was a suave, masculine voice that interposed, with a hint of remonstrance in the tone of it. The speaker, who had approached unobserved, was a middle-aged, narrow-headed man, slightly bearded, and clothed in seemly black; he carried a Bible under his arm.

"Oh, Charley! I'm so glad you've come. This is my husband, my dear——"

And, bursting into tears again, she became so absorbed in a rapid, incoherent narrative of what had happened that she did not notice how, at the first swift meeting of their eyes, the woman and her husband knew each other.

A ghastly astonishment flashed across the man's face and left it grey and drawn. A sudden wrath and hatred flamed into the woman's eyes and was starting into words upon her lips, when a glance at the gentle, appealing face of the man's wife, perhaps some flitting thought of her gracious words and foolish affectionate gratitude, touched and silenced her, as if a quick finger had been laid upon her mouth. Why for no possible profit to herself should she break the heart of this simple, trustful little soul as her own had once been broken?

"We must do something for her," said the wife, and, lowering her voice to a covert whisper, "We must help her—she is poor, and unhappy——"

"We shall have to go in, Alice," the man said uneasily and irritably. He was trying to hope he had not been recognised and was anxious to be gone. "Yes, yes, of course, I am deeply grateful —anything we can do. . . . We can't stand here. We must go in. Thank you very much. We owe

you more than. . . . You must let me repay you in some way. . . . Will you please——"

He dived a shaking hand into his pocket, and as the woman, having thrust the baby into his wife's arms, was turning hurriedly away, he adroitly slipped a handful of silver into her palm before she realised what he was doing, and then promptly hustled his wife and the boy on before him through the iron gateway.

"Here! You—you——!"

The woman rapped out a lurid imprecation and swung round, quivering with fury; but at the sight of that quiet little wifely figure, the pitying face glancing back at her, she clenched her teeth upon her rage abruptly; she sent the coins ringing over the pavement after him, and, ghost of his dead past as she was, vanished from him again into the outer darkness.

He knew then, bewilderedly, that the woman had really recognised him, and, since she was not as he was, he marvelled darkly at her forbearance, and was duly thankful for the mercy Providence had vouchsafed to him; for it enabled him still to enter in and sit amid the elect unashamed.

"WHAT did he mean, though, Tilly?"

Tilly coloured under her powder and answered, with an uneasy laugh:

"Gawd knows! Dirty little swine! What boy was it?"

"Young Jim Dowler. We was comin' from school and he calls to me that his mother says you was nothin' better than a common——"

"You needn't say it agen, Kit," Tilly interrupted sharply.

"An' he says she said when I'd grown up, you'd make me as bad as you are, and she'd a mind to get some society she knowed of to take me away."

"And what did you say?" asked Tilly, with affected indifference.

"Me?" cried Kit, doubling a small brown fist. "I said I wouldn't go with no society—and you'd see they didn't take me. And I punched his head for him and he went home snivellin'."

Tilly laughed again discordantly; then, inconsistently enough, burst into tears.

"Don't cry, Tilly," faltered the child, beginning to cry herself. "They won't take me. You wouldn't let them take me, would you?"

"Let 'em try!" Tilly ejaculated vehemently. "Never you believe anything they say about me, Kit. It's all lies! Never mind what I am. What's that to them? Is it me, your own sister, Kit, that'll bring you to the bad? Am I that sort?"

"I told him he was a young liar," Kit whimpered earnestly. "I punched his head for him, and I'll do it agen if he says that about you any more."

"Are my eyes red?" enquired Tilly abruptly.

She looked into the cracked mirror over the mantelpiece at the reflection of a face still handsome, though a coarse blight had marred its natural womanly sweetness. Her eyes were softened now with tears, but a touch with a handkerchief and a dab of powder quickly removed all superficial traces of emotion.

The room—a combination of bed and sitting-room—was on a third floor in a dingy street off Whitechapel Road, and the two sisters were its sole tenants.

They were orphans; the father had been of that

waste offscouring of humanity that goes to feed the gallows; the mother, a poor-spirited creature, troubled with elusive family traditions of early respectability and more recent religion, died miserably within a year of him. Whereupon Tilly had set herself to grapple with the responsibilities of existence. She was at that time only seventeen, some nine years older than the childish sister whose wistful, innocent helplessness appealed to her irresistibly, and whom she loved, since her mother's death, with an almost maternal solicitude.

She had continued her ill-paid slavery at the match factory with renewed zeal, though not without feminine yearnings after unattainable finery and those comfortable earthly heavens that are opened with golden keys. Then befell a day when the girls revolted against the long hours of monotonous drudgery and the niggardly wage on which they were supposed to maintain themselves, and went on strike. Having Kit to think of, and no relatives to turn to for assistance, Tilly hesitated to join them at the outset, but an intimate knowledge of their hardships, and the sordid wretchedness of her sister's life and her own, pleaded on the side of the rebels, and she resolutely threw in her lot with theirs.

And, during the wintry weeks of privation that ensued, one of the strikers, as forlorn as herself, told her of an unlicensed by-way that led into those earthly heavens of her desire; she remembered her little sister's starved face, the grinding toil and weariness of the past, looked at the prospect of resuming it in the near future, and there was nothing to hold her back.

Her one satisfaction, amid the regrets that sometimes fretted her in her unhallowed paradise, had been that not only could she indulge her love of freedom and finery and pretty things, but she was able to send Kit to school well fed and warmly clad, instead of in rags and often hungry.

However depraved she might have grown, that old fostering love of her small sister kept its whiteness within her. So far, she had found it easy to deceive the child with plausible fictions; she shrank with a sense of loathing and humiliation from the idea that Kit should form any suspicion of the actual life she was living. More than once, of late, she had felt it might be kinder to send Kit away somewhere, to place her where she would be surrounded by healthfuller influences; but she had gladly seized any excuse for postponing the hour of separation; until now, a hint of the shameful

truth having come to the child at last, she was near to determining that she would yield her up instantly even to that society with which she was threatened.

As she reviewed her complexion in the cracked mirror, this half-determination smouldered in her mind; it needed but a spark to fire it into a fixed resolve, and that night the spark fell on it.

She went out shortly after tea.

"Get your lessons done, an' go to bed, Kit, there's a dear," she said, as usual, before going. "Don't you sit up for me. I may be rather late."

Immediately the street door slammed below, Kit slipped her hat on and ran noiselessly downstairs. It was not that she distrusted her sister; she was simply drawn by a childish, overmastering curiosity to see for herself where she did go of an evening.

Along Aldgate, through Houndsditch, and across Bishopsgate Street she dodged among the people, following Tilly at a discreet distance, but never losing sight of her. In Liverpool Street she saw a man stop and speak to her; they stood chatting casually, then strolled on together. Evidently a friend of Tilly's. The man was of an elegant species, known to the urchins of Kit's

acquaintance as "nuts"; he was neatly dressed, after the manner of his kind, wore a glossy tall hat and dangled a cane.

They traversed the crowded thoroughfares leisurely, disappearing, at length, into a flashy, foreign restaurant, and, after loitering irresolutely some way off, Kit ventured forward and peered furtively in at the door. And there, in the gay, thronged shop, Tilly and the gentleman sat at a round table, feasting luxuriously.

Kit was still absorbed in the sight when a waiter suddenly appeared at her elbow, and frightened her by demanding in broken English what she was doing there.

"Oh, I'm—I'm looking for somebody," stammered Kit. "There she is—that's her."

And, too scared to hesitate or reflect, she walked hurriedly in down the shop, and plucked timorously at her sister's sleeve.

Tilly turned upon her with a swift look of dismay.

"Hullo!" grinned the gentleman. "You're a dem fine little gel, ain't you? Sister, eh? And a wonderful likeness, too. He, he, he!"

He put up his eye-glass, and, taking Kit's chin between his finger and thumb, glanced archly at Tilly and mumbled an oblique jest.

The next instant, the waiters and all the diners at other tables were startled by a resounding spank. Tongues fell silent, and half a hundred eyes, all gazing in the same direction, beheld Tilly's gentleman seated alone, staring at nothing in blank amazement; one hand involuntarily caressing his tingling cheek and the other groping feebly for the eye-glass which was hanging down his back.

Tilly had risen, and, convulsively clutching the bewildered child at her side, she strode indignantly to the door; a steely anger flashing from her tearless eyes, but broken voices of shame and affection crying piteously at her heart; and the lonely shadow of to-morrow's separation went through the crowd before her all the way home.

HELEN OF BOW

Although she had not the beauty of the Grecian Helen, she was pretty enough to charm two men, and woman enough not to be able to make up her mind between them.

That the two men were every way dissimilar in character and appearance only increased her difficulty.

For each had desirable qualities that the other lacked, and she was sufficiently capricious to enjoy the homage of both, but too soft-hearted to find pleasure in giving pain to either; therefore she cherished her perplexity in secret and was careful that neither should guess he had a rival.

Her prevailing qualities were an abnormal sentimentality, an eager sympathy with all weak and dependent creatures; and George Anson appealed powerfully to this gentle side of her nature, for he was rather delicate; he was thin, pale, diffident, and afflicted with a nasty, interesting cough. At the same time, and in certain moods she had a

sneaking feminine admiration of manly strength, of physical energy and the heroic attitude of things, and from this standpoint Wat Bolter showed to such superior advantage as to be almost irresistible.

The indulgence in many inexpensive, fictitious romances, by daily or weekly instalments, had, however, made her ambitious. They had furnished her with dreams of marrying a gentleman, and becoming a lady. And here George Anson regained his ascendency as often as he lost it.

For it happened that George was an auctioneer's clerk. He wore white linen, a collar and tie, a neat suit of black, a watch-chain that looked as good as gold, and, on Sundays, kid gloves. Moreover, George had manners, carried a walking-stick, and conscientiously tempered his conversation with grammar.

Wat, on the other hand, was merely a greengrocer's assistant, travelled a daily round with vegetables in a cart, and was at times to be seen delivering half-hundreds of coal. Unlike George, he was never scrupulously clean; on weekdays a wisp of cloth was his only neck-wear, and when, on occasion, he was more ceremoniously dressed, his coarse flannel shirt was not even masked with a

dickey. His language bristled with slang and profanity; his conduct was as rough as his costume, and he would as soon have thought of letting her get into a bus in front of him as of lifting his hat to her.

Yet he was otherwise a fine specimen of a man, broad and tall and muscular, with bright dark eyes and bold handsome features. He had a dashing, independent, somewhat impudent air with him, too, that fluttered the feminine heart; and he was not without notoriety as an amateur pugilist. George Anson was by comparison insignificant—nearly contemptible; but then any such comparison was ridiculous—George had to be judged by totally different standards. He was a gentleman, and Wat's robuster virtues, admirable perhaps in their way, were distinctly ungentlemanly.

Consequently Helen wavered. She was happy with either when the other was away, and torn between the two when she thought of them in solitude.

She had known Wat first and was more or less reconciled to his inadequacies until George Anson appeared and began to honour her with his attentions. His nicer graces dazzled her simple fancy; she encouraged him; she liked his grammatical

elegance of speech, walked out with him tentatively, thrilled with a fear that Wat might learn of her fickleness, and tried hard to persuade herself that George was the man of her choice. He was polite and not strong, and his cough made an eloquent appeal to her. It pleased her to assume a sort of maternal protectiveness toward him, and pleased him as much to yield readily in all things to her wishes. Wat was not at all like that; he was brusque and domineering; he had no use for her as a guardian angel, but treated her as though she were a foolish child, took his own way, insisted that his way should be hers, and, instead of being subservient and complaisant, was quick to resent her caprices and bullied her and swore at her when he was annoyed as freely as if they had already been married.

Helen was still wavering in this fashion when an insidious rumour found its way to Wat's ears and disturbed the aboriginal savage that was never more than half-asleep in him.

"Look 'ere, 'Elen," he remonstrated; "who's this yer bloke that's bin a-foolin' rhand abart yer lately?"

"What bloke?" she demanded, flushing and inwardly quaking.

"You know well enough. Bill Evans seen you. Who is 'e? What yer bin goin' out with 'im for?"

"What's that got to do with you? I can go with who I like, can't I?" Helen pulled herself together and bridled. "Who are you, I'd like to know? Cheek! You mind yer own business, Wat Bolter."

"Oh, it's like that, is it?" Wat snarled dangerously. "Well, that's what I'm goin' to do. I'll mind my own business, don't you fret! So don't you go with 'im no more, see? I'm not no ruddy mug, an' I don't stand no hanky-panky from any gel, nor from any feller. You let me ketch that chap alonger you an'—blimey, you won't know him agen when I've done with 'im!"

"Oh, very clever, ain't you! Well, you leave him alone. He's a friend o' mine, and I shall go out with him as often as I want to. So there!"

"Will yer?" he snapped. "We'll see!"

Helen was ruffled and rebellious; she walked with Wat that evening under protest, and they wrangled with increasing heat all the way, and she returned home weeping but unsubdued.

It chanced that within a week of this George Anson met her as she was coming away from the dressmaker's shop where she was employed. She was acutely aware of her new dress and the tasty

new feather in her hat, and the bow with which George greeted her reacted in his favour, for the heroes in her illustrated novelettes were frequently depicted in the throes of precisely such a gracious obeisance.

He strolled beside her, discoursing pleasantly, his watch-chain glittering in the sunset; and nothing marred the harmony of their genteel companionship until they had turned out of the crowded Mile End Road and were traversing a quiet back street. Here, by accident or design, Wat Bolter came upon them unexpectedly. With a sudden thrill of terror Helen became alive to the fact that he was approaching along the pavement with a menacing scowl upon his brow.

She was stunned with surprise and apprehension. She clutched the arm she held, but could not control herself sufficiently to utter a word of explanation or warning; and, not being acquainted with his rival, George went on talking carelessly, his serenity entirely unruffled, until Wat was so near as to fairly block his progress. Then, before he could step aside or look up, without a sound, and so swiftly that he did not see it coming, a merciless fist shot out and sent him reeling and tumbling helplessly into the gutter.

"What did I tell yer?" roared Wat, glaring fiercely at the affrighted girl. "Now let him git up, damn 'im, and I'll give 'im as much more as he wants. Git up, yer little rat, git up! I'll teach yer to go 'angin' rhand arter other blokes' gals!"

"I'm no gal o' yours, you bully!" retorted Helen, quivering with excitement. "You leave him be. I can please myself, can't I?—without askin' you."

"Let 'im git up," Wat insisted. "Me and 'im 'll settle abart that."

George scrambled to his feet, a scared and pitiable object, and stooped to pick up his hat.

"What have I done to you?" he asked nervously. "I don't know who you are. I never interfered with you."

"You're a liar," thundered Wat. "She knows, if you don't. Put 'em up, an' quick abart it."

"What do you mean? What's the matter?" George was dazed and demoralised. "Who are you?"

"Don't you worry abart that," cried Wat clenching his fists and squaring up aggressively. "She knows. Put 'em up, before I slosh yer. Come on! If you lick me you can 'ave 'er, an' be damned to yer both!"

"You leave him be," Helen reiterated. "He ain't going to fight. He ain't a low fighting blackguard like you."

She was as painfully apprehensive for George as a hen might be for its unfledged chicken; if he fought she had no doubt of the result; but an interested crowd had gathered and was momentarily growing and her vanity was not unpleasantly titillated by a vague consciousness of her position as the prize for which these two were publicly contending.

"I'll let 'im be when I've done with 'im," raged Wat. "Now then, yer blighter—ready? I'm comin'. Put up yer feelers. D'yer 'ear? Look out!"

With that, he plunged in and the panic-stricken George shrank abjectly, elevating a bony elbow to protect his hat. There was a brief, wild scuffle; two swift blows, then George's head appeared locked under Wat's left arm, Wat's right, with a huge fist at the end of it, working vigorously, piston-like, and as soon as he was released George fell limply on his back in the road with his face bleeding.

He lay gasping and half-stupefied for a moment, Helen wringing her hands and glancing about

despairingly for the police; then he re-erected himself slowly, and, fumbling for his handkerchief, stood dabbling his sanguinary countenance.

"Let me alone," he sobbed, with a glance of entreaty at the crowd. "I never touched him. I've done nothing to him."

The crowd encouraged him with ironical cries, advising him to keep his eyes open and go in and win.

"Ain't he a precious beauty!" jeered Wat, pointing him out to Helen. "Look at 'im! Why, I've 'ardly stroked 'im so far. I'll knock the bloomin' stuffin' out of 'im when I make a beginnin'."

"Oh, yes, we know what a toff you are!" Helen scoffed. "He's not one of your dirty kind, but he's got as much pluck as you have any day."

"Ho! Then he don't think you're worth fightin' for—p'raps that's it."

The crude sarcasm stung her to the quick and exasperated her beyond all sense of discretion.

"Why—why don't you go for him, George?" she urged him, white and shaking with wrath. "You're as good as he is. You ain't afraid of him, are you? Go for him—go on!"

George clenched his bloody handkerchief, and

regarded her through tears of fear and reproach. But her words pierced and rankled, and roused him; they goaded him out of his bewildered debasement into a rising frenzy of mortification and reckless defiance.

"Afraid? What of? I'm not afraid of him or any man," he shouted desperately. And the mere affectation of valour seemed to warm and hearten him. He was fired spontaneously with a mad craving to redeem his shattered dignity, to reinstate himself in her regard and to avenge the shame and suffering he endured. A moment's hesitation would have quenched his ardour; but he did not hesitate. He struck instantly, as the fire within him flared to its height.

"Come on, you scoundrel!" he blustered. "Take that!"

The mob roared applause, and he hurled himself on his enemy.

A confused scramble of four feet, a whirling of arms, a tense panting and sound of hurried blows—and George was in the dust once more with more blood on his face than ever.

He sprang up again, but the fire within him was flickering to extinction, and he threw a strained, hunted look round, as if he had some idea of

making a run for safety. But there was no opening in the crowd. Wat was already advancing upon him, eager for the fray, and he was giving himself up for lost, when help came all of a sudden from a wholly unexpected quarter.

Smarting with humiliation at the sight of her damaged champion, Helen had at first been impetuously inclined to scorn and disown him; especially when the onlookers laughed at his defeat; but his flickering burst of ineffectual courage and the crushing punishment it drew upon him touched her strangely—it appealed to all the woman in her and kindled her to such a pitch of angry compassion that she could restrain herself no longer. She rushed upon the conqueror like a tigress, grasped his shoulder and swung him heavily back.

"Look at him—look at him—you beast—you coward, you!" she screamed. "Hit one of your own size. Do you want to kill him? Oh, you brute! He never done anything to you, you dirty, hulking——"

Her shrill voice choked and died in her throat. Her hand swept upwards, and Wat, a little aghast at this unlooked for intervention, only realised her intention when it swept down with a sharp snap on his cheek.

The mob applauded delightedly, and she fell upon him striking and scratching like a fury. Wat was so completely dumfounded that, flinging her from him after the first outburst, he could only stand gaping and spellbound, like a man in an impossible nightmare.

And she took no further notice of him. He heard the little vixen bullying George for being such a fool as to try to fight such a great big brute like that there, and fumed inwardly with a smouldering jealous rage as he watched, through the haze of his bewilderment, and saw her take that beaten, submissive figure by the arm and hustle it away through the crowd as if it belonged to her.

AN EXTRA TURN

He was a plump little man with an unregenerate twinkle in his eye, and looked as if he hadn't been washed or shaved for some time. His coat was far gone in decay and had an unwholesome, fungus-like appearance; his trousers were corrugated into preposterous wrinkles, and his boots tied on with string.

"Yus, I've 'ad some bad times," he sighed, "but the wust I ever 'ad, sir—I'm not likely to forgit it! Hunger an' cold? Oh, no, nothin' so easy as that. I don't mind tellin' you, but as a rule I'd sooner talk about something else.

"It was like this," he continued: "I'd bin on the tramp with a pair o' bootlaces in my 'and, in case a copper seen me callin' at a house, y'know, to arsk if the kind lady could spare a trifle for a poor man that can't git no work, an' by two in the afternoon all I'd picked up was threepence, so I knocked off to spend it.

"Bynby, I starts agen, an' hoofs out to one o'

these new 'arf-baked suburbs—I dunno the name of it, an' don't want to, but I've lived a better life ever since for fear I might 'ave to go there when I die.

"All the same, I must say, I didn't do so bad at one house, where a very nice, kind old lady opened the door, an' says, 'My poor man,' she says, 'you look hungry.' 'Not so hungry as I feel, mum,' I says. 'Well, sit on the step,' says she, 'an' I'll see if I can't fetch you something.' She did, too. Cold meat an' bread for a appetiser, an', when I'd wolfed that an' said I was still starvin', she was so upset she fetched the leg of a chicken, an' nearly 'arf a cold plum puddin' which 'ad been as big as a foot-ball, an' when I'd finished, I tell yer, I felt fair be-au-ti-ful. I felt I couldn't walk an' orter 'ave somebody to carry me. I arst if there was any chance of twopence for a night's lodgin', but she said she never give cash becos it so often went in drink and she was a lifelong teetotaller, an' she wouldn't break the rule even for one that was another.

"Well, I was that dry I tried some more places, an' just about dusk I began on a row of pretty villas, all creeper up the front an' a little passage round to the side door. An', when I mouched round the side o' one of 'em, I seen the kitchen

winder open an' heard voices, so I stood quiet an' had a look in.

"There was the missis of the house, holdin' a plate with a small bit o' meat on it, an' from what she was tellin' the gel I made out that that bit o' meat 'ad bin thoroughly well poisoned, an' later on they were to bring down poor Fido, who was awful ill an' orter be put out of 'is misery, an' give it to 'im for 'is supper. She put the plate on the dresser, an' then the gal went with 'er out o' the room.

"So a idea come to me, all of a sudden. I git 'em like that sometimes. Little idea, as I thought, for makin' enough for a drink, anyhow. I tries the door, slips in quietly, took the plate off the dresser an' put it on the table, slips the meat into my pocket, an' stood waitin'.

"Next minute, I hears the gel comin' back, and I says gentle-like, but loud enough for 'er to hear, 'Now please don't you be scared, miss, I'm not after no 'arm. I come in and there was nobody 'ere, an' now I'm not feelin' very well.'

"She looks in, an' starts screamin' direckly she see me. An' presently the missis an' the master of the house come hurryin' up to 'er to find what's the matter, an' they all breaks into the kitchen together.

"As soon as the missis seen the empty plate on the table she goes pale an' catches 'er breath an' says, 'Oh, Alfred!' to the master, an' 'e says, 'What?'

"'Beg pardon, sir an' madam,' says I, humble. 'I 'ope as you will forgive me. It was a very small slice an' I ain't 'ad no food since yesterday. I seen it through the winder an', as there was nobody 'ere, the temptation was too strong an' I 'ad to come in.'

"Then they all started in helpin' each other to tell me what was the matter with the meat, an' I put on a faint an' says, 'That's what's the matter with me, then,' an' sinks in a chair.

"You should ha' seen 'em. I was afraid they was all goin' mad with fright. They chivies the gel off sharp for the doctor. I tried to stop that. I said I was pretty 'ealthy an' thought I should git over it, if they'd gimme the brass to run quick to the chemist an' buy somethin'. But they wouldn't listen. They said the poison was painless but quite deadly, an' unless somethin' was done it would out me before I knew how I was.

"So I begun to take on with hysterics an' call for brandy, but they said brandy would do me more 'arm than good, besides there wasn't a drop in the house. I'd fair struck a dry patch, guvner.

"As soon as the gel 'ad gorn flyin' off, the missis

says, 'Whatever we do, Alfred, don't let 'im go to sleep. In these cases if they go to sleep it's fatal. I've always read that. Walk 'im about, Alfred, an' keep 'im awake.'

"So he grabs me by the arm an' the neck—hefty big chap 'e was—an' heaves me out o' the chair an' starts walkin' me up an' down the floor. I told 'im I wasn't sleepy, but 'e took no notice—'e was excited an' nervous, an' I could see 'e was thinkin' 'ow they would censure 'im at the inquest, an' there was me walkin' up an' down, 'im makin' me, an' both of us up an' down, an' up an' down together, like bears in a cage, an' all the while I was thinkin' 'ow to git away.

"'I'm all right now,' I says, soothin'. 'I feel quite better.'

"'You can't,' he says. 'Hold up. Keep movin'. The doctor won't be long.'

"'Oh, dear, dear,' says the missis, wringin' 'er 'ands, 'what a time that gel is! 'E can't feel better—of course 'e can't. I'm afraid our doctor must be out an' she's gorn on for Dr. Graves. Oh, Alfred, look at the poor man, 'e's goin'.'

"I wished I was, but Alfred stuck on to me.

"'Isn't there nothin' we can do?' he says. 'Git 'im a glass o' water.'

"'My Gord, no!' I says. 'Let me die in peace.'

"Then all of a jiffy the missis 'as a brain-wave.

"'Oh, Alfred, why ever didn't I remember it sooner!!' she shouts. 'We orter give 'im a emetic. Wait a moment. Keep 'im walkin'.'

"An' she nips out o' the room like a streak o' lightnin'.

"I tried desperate to git away arter that, but 'e was too strong for me. I dussen't tell 'im the truth, an' couldn't think of no excuse that he would listen to. All the more I said I was quite all right, 'e thought I was gettin' delirious. 'Is missis was 'ardly back in the room when he wouldn't argue but, 'im bein' twice my size an' strong as a 'orse, he bangs me down in a chair, an' pinches my nose with one 'and an' pulls my mouth open with the other, an' before I could git a word out she 'arf chokes me with a spoonful o' stuff that—my Lord, I swear was never meant for inward application. They shut my mouth an' held on to me till it was all gorn, an' then jerks me up an' starts walkin' me up an' down 'arder than ever.

"'That's all right,' I says, as well as I could speak. 'That's made me quite well.'

"'No, it hasn't,' he says. 'It can't have, not

yet.' And presently he calls out, 'It's no good, Annie. Give 'im another dose.'

"I made a fight for it, I tell yer. But he 'ad me down in the chair agen, an' they pushed some more of it into me that fierce that I began to be afraid they'd gone clean dotty, an' if I didn't humour them they'd throttle me sooner than let me die.

"'Let me 'ave a breath o' fresh air,' I yells, thinkin' I might stand a better chance of doin' a bunk if I could git outside. 'That's what I want.'

"They seemed to think it a good idea, an' rushed me out into the garden, an' he starts walkin' me up an' down the gravel path, till I gasps, ''Old 'ard, guvner. Just loose me for a tick.'

"It took 'im off 'is guard like, he leaves go o' my arm for a second, an' off I goes afore he could catch 'old agen.

"I could 'ear 'em both runnin' an' shoutin' behind, but I wasn't 'avin' no more o' what they'd got to give me, an' I never looked round nor stopped for miles.

"But all that runnin' was bad, very bad, arter a 'eavy meal. An' them emetics was no good to me.

"My word!

"People thinks me unsympathetic an' 'ard-hearted now, becos I can read about a man blown

up with dynamite an' feel no pity for 'im. I can't bear the sight o' chicken an' plum puddin' no more, though I don't expect it was their fault. Oh, I know what I'm talkin' about. If there's to be Prohibition it ought to be agenst them emetics. They're what I call cruelty. Oh—Well, there, if I was ever to 'ave my choice in future between them an' the dedliest poison, make you no bloomin' error, I'd chance my luck with the poison, an' die smilin'."

THE WEDDING DAY

THE long white road wavered, like the ghost of a dead river, through a flat green country that lay parching under a June sun. From the shady recesses of his ancient hostelry, the landlord of The Plough emerged into the sunlight, and stared up the road and down the road, as if he were looking for customers.

In the arid meadows, behind winding hedgerows, cattle stood knee-deep in the dry grass. Here and there red-tiled roofs and tarred wooden walls of farm buildings gleamed and gloomed amid leafy green settings; and the village, a little cluster of little houses, snoozed in a distant wrinkle of the landscape. But there was nobody on the road.

Nobody, that is, who counted for anybody with the innkeeper; nobody except a tramp, who plodded slowly in the shade of the hedge with his shabby shoulders hunched and his hands in his pockets. The landlord noted his snail-like advance with indifference, and went back indoors out of the sun.

Opposite The Plough the tramp paused to peer up at the sign, arching a strong brown hand over his brows. He was a big, weather-bitten fellow, whose looks expressed nothing but easy-natured indolence. A search through several pockets yielded no more than twopence. He regarded the coins thoughtfully as they lay, looking unusually small, in his broad palm, then carried them into The Plough and began rapping on the counter, his eyes being full of the sunshine, before he detected the portly landlord in attendance.

"Mornin', boss," he cried. "I didn't see you there. Gimme the best drop o' beer you can for twopence."

He threw down his money; and, seeing he was not a tramp of the ordinary, everyday quality, the landlord served him liberally and condescended to an affable remark about the weather.

"A fair scorcher," the other agreed. "Gives you a full-size thirst too, don't it?"

The landlord nodded.

"Stranger hereabouts?" he presumed.

"I am, boss, and I ain't."

"Oh! How may that be?"

"Well, I was born in these parts."

"Was you now?"

"Ah. Emigrated with my old people when I was only a nipper, and, you'd hardly believe it, but I don't remember the place now no more than if I'd never seen it before."

"Well, well. It hasn't altered so much either," said the landlord. "Born in Little Totleigh, was you?" with a jerk of his head toward the village.

"No, not there. Just the other side of Chelmsford, yonder. I've done no good at all, knockin' about abroad, since the old folk died, so I took a fancy to work my passage home an' find out if I'd got any relations living in this part o' the world who'd be willing to help me to settle down quiet like an' give me a job as a farm hand or something —I'm pretty good at that—and all I want is to cast anchor and have a home o' my own."

"And did you find any?"

"Not one. Haven't come across a living soul who remembers the name even!"

"What name is it?"

"Linnett. George Linnett. George after my old dad."

The landlord hummed, and shook his head.

"How long since your family emigrated?"

"Near forty year."

"Ah-h! People die, and move, and forget a lot

in forty years. I only came here eleven year ago myself."

"I might have guessed it was no good. Nothin' I try ever is. I've been an unlucky sort of fool all my life, boss—a durned all-round fool."

"Why," a comfortable, full-bodied man, the landlord could afford to be philosophical, "we're all fools at times, neighbour."

"But I've been one at all times; that's what's the matter with me. I'd never have come nosing around here at all if I hadn't been the fool I am. Nobody knows me. How could I expect they would? I can't get any work. . . . I suppose you couldn't give me a job yourself, boss? I'm clean broke, and I could do with a meal. I'm on the tramp to London now, and if I could earn a trifle to help me on the way——"

"You wouldn't do for a waiter," the landlord laughed, "else you might have lent me a hand with a wedding dinner I've got on to-day. Out o' my usual line rather. The party's drove in to Chelmsford for the ceremony, and they're comin' here for dinner."

"Swell wedding, I suppose?"

"Not so bad. Widder and widderer they are."

"What you might call a fair match then?"

"All depends," said the landlord darkly. "The widder's a nice little woman. She put up at The Plough and I've had her stayin' here nigh on a year. Nice, homely little body, *and* plenty o' brass. She bought a house of her own just beyond the village, and left us and moved into it a few months ago. But she's kept very friendly with my missis and insisted on having the dinner here."

"Widderer's a local man?" asked the stranger, for the sake of saying something.

"Yes. Josh Simson. Jobmaster in Chelmsford. But, between you an' me, he's no good. It's her money he's after, and when he gets it there won't be much for either of them—not for long. I don't believe she really cares for him——"

"Then what's she having him for?"

"Why, you know what wimmin are. She's lonely; wants a man to take care of her. And he has a way with wimmin, Josh has. She didn't know anybody when she first came here, and he's made hisself uncommon obligin', lent her one of his traps and gone about with her helpin' her to——"

"Ezra! Ezra! Come and help me here a minute," cried a testy voice from within. "I've called you three times."

"Never heard you, my dear. Comin'!"

Left to himself, George Linnett emptied his tankard, contemplated the dusty road and the fierce light without, and returned to his high stool by the counter.

The advent of a waggoner, who pulled up his team at the door and came in for refreshments, recalled the landlord from the depths of the house; and, when he had carried bread and cheese and beer for this new patron into the cool bar-parlour, George felt constrained to put forward some excuse for lingering.

"About that job, now, boss," he suggested.

"There's nothing I know of. What's your line?"

"Oh, I've done everything—farming, painting, bricklaying, carpentering, gardening — everything."

"Whitewashing?"

"I've whitewashed enough walls to build a city."

"I was thinkin', the old house needs touchin' up. I've got the stuff in the shed and meant to have a go at it myself, but there's a good deal to do here, and I ain't so active as I used to be, and—" he sighed, and frowned dubiously. "I did have a man at it last week—happened to be passin', same

as you—but he persuaded me to loan him two shillin' on account, and then went and got drunk with it at The Red Lion in the village, and I ain't seen him since."

"I don't want no loans. Give me some grub and a shake-down o' nights, in a barn, or anywhere, and five bob when it's finished and I'll make a real job of it for you."

The landlord hesitated. He withdrew to consult his wife, and, after she had more or less covertly surveyed the stranger from a door-way behind the bar, he came back and struck the bargain.

"Might be as well not to start till this wedding is all over," he said. "They'll be here soon now, and we're giving them their spread in our best parlour at the back here. I don't know, though, but you might be making a start on this side o' the house, where it's shady and they won't see you. Might as well do that. Sooner you start the sooner you'll be done. Come on out, and I'll show you."

And so it came to pass that George made a beginning.

He was up a ladder, near the roof, operating with a large brush and a pail of water, giving the wall a preliminary wash, when he heard the wedding

party drive in from Chelmsford. Laughing and chatting exuberantly, they bubbled over out of two smart traps and poured into the inn.

"Ezra! What-ho, Ezra!" The bridegroom, who had already been refreshing himself and was radiating joviality, hammered on the bar, though the landlord was already in waiting. "Drinks all round, Ezra. We're all dead dry. Give yer own orders, all of you."

The bride, a fresh-coloured, plump, comely little woman, nearer forty than thirty, perched, moodily fanning herself with her handkerchief, on one of the high stools; but her husband's half-dozen relatives and friends, male and female, stood in vivacious pairs and giggled and flirted with increasing merriment.

"Tired, Mrs. Simson?" called the landlord, toiling dexterously at his beer-engine.

"A little," she sighed. "A little. It's very hot. And all this reminds me so of my other man, poor fellow."

"Oh, never you mind him," blustered Mr. Simson. "He's dead an' gorn, and you're goin' to forget him now."

"Not now, nor ever," she declared stubbornly. "I've told you so all along, Josh. And I can't help

feeling it's a mistake—we ought to have waited longer. He may not be dead——"

He broke into a jolly roar of laughter.

"You only say that sort of nonsense to aggravate me, but I don't care!" he shouted breezily. "You got a good live husband on the spot, and you ought to be happy, like me. Hi, Ezra! Where's your missis? Fetch her out, and the gel too. She must have something. I'm goin' to stand treat all round. The dinner will keep for a few minutes. Come in you two—" he beckoned the drivers from the traps. "Come on! Order whatever you like. Everybody's in this. Anybody else in the house, Ezra? I won't have nobody left out. I don't get married every day."

"There's nobody else—except a waggoner havin' a snack in the bar-parlour."

"He's got to have a drink." The wedding guests laughed with him and cheered. "Fetch out the waggoner, Jim."

Mr. Simson slapped his spruce best-man heartily on the back, and the waggoner was soon ducking and grinning obligingly at the company over a tankard.

"*Now* are we all here, Ezra?"

"Plenty of us."

"Didn't I notice a painter on a ladder round the corner outside?"

"Oh, he's busy."

"Never mind. All are welcome! Fetch in the painter off the ladder, Jim."

"Now you leave him be. My last painter got drunk and went off an' never finished the job, and——"

"That don't matter—they all do. Fetch in that painter, Jim," Mr. Simson noisily insisted. "I won't have a man left out in the cold on a day like this. Here—damme, I'll fetch him myself."

He dashed out, and after a brief absence brought George back with him in triumph.

"Here he is," he laughed uproariously. "Draw him a mug of the very best, Ezra. Put a head on it—put two heads on it. There we are! Here, painter, pour this down yer neck and drink good luck to me and the missis."

George Linnett raised his tankard, with an elaborate bow toward the bride.

"My very best respects, mum," he began, "and may you——" He stopped and gaped, and gasped "Goramighty! Sal—what on earth are you a-doin' here?"

"George!" she screamed.

She was off the stool in a twinkling, and flung herself upon him in such a frenzy that he staggered under the impact and the tankard fell and the beer splashed over the nearest boots.

"George! Oh, my dear, dear lad!" she was crying and laughing, heedless of the amazement and confusion that was paralysing all the others. "I can't believe it. An' you're not dead!"

"No," he rumbled, submitting to her embraces without a struggle. "Not that I knows of."

"Where have you been? When did you come here?"

"I come to Chelmsford three days ago. Y'see I was born——"

"I know. I remembered you told me. That's why I came here—thinking I might find you or somebody that had belonged to you. Oh, George, I've been an unkind woman to you. It was my nagging that drove you away from home, but I never dreamt you would go for good—Oh, how could you! When you didn't come back I searched and enquired everywhere, and made out you'd sailed from Australia, and I'd no money to follow you. I was nearly mad. I took a place as housekeeper and advertised for you, and at last one day I heard from a London solicitor that my old Aunt

Grady was dead and had left me all her property, and I'm rich now, George."

"It's more than I am, Sal."

"It ain't. It's all yours as much as mine, isn't it? I set out a-purpose to look for you, and traced you to New York, and couldn't hear another word of you. So I came here. I thought there might be some relations you'd written to, but the only Digby I could find in the place——"

"He told me Linnett," observed the landlord.

"That's right. Linnett's the name I was born with, boss; but I was Digby in Australia. There was reasons——"

"Never mind his name," cried the bride. "It's him, and that's enough for me."

"But what about me?" faltered Mr. Simson.

"Well, what about you?"

"You don't mean, Sal," he protested desperately, "you'll take on agen with a man like him?"

"That's what I do mean. He's my wedded husband—the only man I ever cared for, and a better man than you'll ever be."

"You said he bolted and deserted you shameful——"

"Oh, you wicked villain, you! George—he was so fussy and kind, driving me about looking for

your relations, and pestering me to marry him; but I said I never would so long as there was the least little hope you was alive. Then he said he'd got a friend in New York and he'd find out, and he brought me a letter he said was from his friend, and it said you had died of fever in the hospital and was buried in a cemetery—I forget its name—and I gave him money to send out for a tombstone —Oh, you lying, wicked rascal! I don't believe now it ever came from America at all."

In a paroxysm of fury she pounced on Mr. Simson; a crisp sound startled the room, and he dodged away from her, feeling his face solicitously.

Then the landlord interposed, and in the interests of peace the best man hustled Mr. Simson into the bar parlour, where he subsided at the table and drooped despondently over the waggoner's unfinished meal.

"Let me go and bash his head in," pleaded George. "I've killed better men than him in my time."

"No, no, he isn't worth it, George. Leave him alone and we'll get away out of this," said the bride, clinging to him persuasively. "My own house is close by, and it's yours too. Oh, my dear, there'll be no more naggin', for we'll never have

to go through the poor, worrying old days any more. Come along."

He was too bewildered to know how to act; but when she slipped her hand under his arm he yielded and allowed her to lead him.

The dazed assembly watched them go in silence.

"She's not going?" exclaimed Mr. Simson, suddenly rousing in the parlour. "Run after her. Tell her it's bigamy."

"What's the good o' that?" the best man put it to him soothingly. "So's yours."

"That's true," the landlord remarked to those around him; adding as an afterthought, "Looks as if I should never get my whitewashing done."

Then, on a sudden impulse, he ran into the kitchen, dashed through the bar again and out into the middle of the road, where, with a sympathetic glance at the oddly assorted pair departing together, she in her wedding finery, he in his worn, unseemly duds, he contorted himself like a bowler at cricket and sent an old shoe whirling after them.

"I'd saved it for to-day," he apologised shamefacedly to Mr. Simson's friends, "and it seemed a pity to waste it."

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